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THE MIRACLES AND MYTHS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

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THE MIRACLES AND MYTHS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

WITH OTHER ESSAYS AND SERMONS

BY

JOSEPH MAY, LL.D.

BOSTON
GEORGE H. ELLIS, PUBLISHER, 272 CONGRESS STREET
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INTRODUCTORY NOTE.

THE sermons here collected are reprinted at the suggestion of several friends who have kindly assumed the trouble, and provided for the expense of their publication in this form.

They are a few out of many of like tenor, delivered in the ordinary course of pastoral instruction and with a very simple purpose. Of widely different dates, they have only the logical connection involved in a common aim.

Throughout the writer's active ministry it pressed upon him as a weighty obligation to do whatever he might to discover and to illustrate the real historical character and quality of Jesus.

Probably what is often called negative in this effort is the chief substance of it. Since light will shine of its own brightness, if unobstructed, it might be enough if we could relieve a great and highly unique personality from the encumbering associations with which the cre-

dulity of the ages and misdirected piety have so overloaded it as deeply to conceal its true lineaments, distort its suggestions, and profoundly impair its moral and spiritual effectiveness.

The task of rehabilitation must still be a long one, and its results may never be so distinct and definite as one might earnestly desire. But our recent time has made a hopeful beginning, and fidelity in appropriating the results of our best scholarship and candor in uttering them would rapidly promote it.

If those who have proposed and furthered the reissue of these discourses are not too much mistaken in their estimate of their possible utility, it will be a profound satisfaction to their author to hope that the efforts of his past days may still, in some very small measure, contribute to the unveiling of the true historical Jesus and the work of making him known to a world which has laboriously worshipped, but has most imperfectly understood, and still less faithfully followed him.

J. M.

FLORENCE, ITALY,
October, 1901.

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I.

THE NEW TESTAMENT MIRACLES.

"Jesus of Nazareth; a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs."— ACTS ii. 22.

THE miraculous stories of the New Testament, while not essentially different from those of the Old Testament or of other ancient chronicles, receive a peculiar importance from the fact that they are intimately connected with a biography which is at once most interesting, in many of its features unique, and justly the object of the most venerating loyalty among Christian peoples. They are supported in the popular mind by the supernatural claims set up for the character of Jesus, which claims have been almost universally conceded until near the present time. Moreover, it may fairly be admitted that they are, for the most part, less weird and more dignified in their form than most others, and therefore to that extent more probable (although the argument from verisimilitude is of very

limited application). Finally, most of them are sufficiently characteristic of Jesus in their benevolence and grace, and in the moral purpose often connected with the physical result. In a word, the miracles of Jesus are, for us, the highest test instance of the miraculous in history. They have greater probability, they are nearer to our own time, than any others generally believed to have happened. The acceptance or rejection of them amounts, practically, to the acceptance or rejection of what is commonly called — though not correctly called — supernaturalism. At least, if these are not credited, there are none which can long expect to be.

One great change in the general aspect of the question may be noted at the outset. Formerly these accounts were put forward as supports and confirmations of the supernatural commission of Jesus. He was divinely commissioned because he could work miracles. They confirmed and strengthened the edifice of supernatural Christianity. To-day, however, it is much the other way. They are becoming a load which Christian faith has to carry. They have to be defended. Whoever accepts them does so because

of his reverence for the character with which they are associated rather than because they are historically substantiated in a manner which compels credit. It would be easier to accept Jesus as a religious leader if his biography did not contain elements of this sort. In other words (to quote Rev. Dr. Hedge), men nowadays "believe the miracles because they believe in Jesus; not in Jesus because they accept the miracles."

But, as natural science has advanced, and especially the science of criticism in respect to the New Testament, there becomes obvious an escape from the dilemma herein implied. Until recently we have been held either to accept both Jesus and the miracles, or rejecting one, to reject the other. This cannot, to-day, be alleged as inevitable. We can accept Jesus most fully, yet discredit his miraculous acts. In fact, even the belief of his deity might be entertained compatibly with the rejection of the miraculous elements of the New Testament. As natural science advances, deeds of the sort we call miraculous become not only insignificant, but, as Dr. Bartol so well expressed it, "unthinkable." The progress of New Testament criticism shows that

these writings are not of such a nature nor accredited in such a manner as even to permit, much less to compel, the acceptance on their authority of things unnatural and disorderly. That Jesus was a supernatural being would not, therefore, if a fact, involve or imply or suggest the possibility of his doing things contrary to the established order of nature. It would imply rather the exact reverse. It is a crude sentiment which expects revelations of divinity through strange outward occurrences. The truest revelation of deity is the gigantic order of the universe, in which there is no part so minute that it does not fit harmoniously into place, no chord so tenuous that it does not vibrate in tune. Curiously enough the great argument for God has in past times been the orderliness of nature,— the "argument from design." The existence of an intelligent Creator has been deduced from the observation that all parts of creation agree in a purposeful system. This is precisely antagonistic to the expectation that God should be manifest in prodigies. The orderly Providence would shun the self-contradiction of disorderly acts. Its true personal manifestations

must always, in fact, be spiritual. The sensuous is no proper avenue for them. The sensuous can only suggest, not reveal God. And its proper suggestion of God is its suggestion of thought which is testified by purpose, by order, — not of mere power which the overruling of order might exhibit, perhaps, but could only exhibit at the expense of the higher revelation of thought. So far from working miracles then, a supernatural being, meaning by that one higher toward God than man is, would in the clearest manner confirm nature. His character would be a luminous illustration of those truths which are engraved on, or rather interwoven in, the order of nature. He would reflect God by illustrating the truths of order, reason, purpose; not by conveying ideas of mere power and arbitrary will, or by meaningless display.

The expectation of miracles is, therefore, a crude and primitive notion of the manner in which deity or supernatural person should manifest itself.

Think of it practically and see if it is not. Place any miraculous action in relation to the circumstances of the present day and consider

how unimpressive it would really be; certainly how inadequate it would be to reveal spiritual things, or to accredit the doer of it as a being of a supernatural order, or of peculiar divine commission. Take such a one as the first reported of Jesus, the making of wine out of water. So far from attesting the spiritual rank of the agent of it, it would, as a strict miracle, either appear trivial, or it would exact all our respect for him as grounded on direct perception of his spiritual elevation to find him dealing in such means of self-attestation. The fact that the mind of to-day instinctively seeks to refer every strange occurrence to some law, — that is, to reduce it to an element in the orderliness of nature, — shows that the verdict of reason is that the anomalous is not to be expected of God; that is, is not worthy of God.

Suppose one should come among us at this moment, and by a word cure the disabled limb of some member of this assembly, what would the general impression be? Would it not be that he worked the result by forces resident in nature not yet known to us all, but an integral part of the natural order? Unquestionably it

would, and nothing but some attestation of the character of the miracle-worker would persuade you that he rose above the laws of nature in the act.

But that which would be a rational verdict as to a particular case is a rational judgment as to a system. And so, I repeat, we are not to expect from God, or any supernatural being, displays of disorderly superiority to law. Ability to assert such superiority to order has no relevancy to the matter of spiritual exaltation. It might, in fact, and has always been held to pertain to diabolism as well as to the angelic or prophetic character.

Spiritual exaltation, the realm of the supernatural, must reveal itself to us in ways of its own,— ways significant of its own nature, harmonious with its own order, not through channels of disorder in a different sphere.

The true revelation of God is that consciousness which his being finally awakens in the human soul.

If, then, the power of miracle is not appropriate to the character of a supernatural being, we are not held by any reverence for Jesus, as a

supernatural being, to accept accounts of miracles as true of him. This point needs clearly to be seen, because reverence for him has so long been entangled with the literal credence of existent accounts. You may have a view of Jesus biographically less distinct and complete, but essentially and spiritually more full and true, if you reject these stories as mythical tales than if you accept them, and his spiritual rank will not necessarily be altered by your rejection of them.

The question, then, of the New Testament miracles is, after all, essentially the same with that of the Old Testament ones. Your views regarding the former are justly the same in general with those regarding the latter. Whatever is essentially incredible is so in the days of Jesus as much as in those of Moses or at the present time. Whatever is inconsistent with orderly thought of God, whatever is unworthy of the God we are hourly learning and trusting as the God of order, challenges dissent as much in the Gospels as in Judges or Kings, or in the lives of Catholic saints, or in the stories of modern spiritism. We can venerate Jesus and yet not believe that he supernaturally produced

baked loaves and cooked fish for a multitude of men and women, or expelled demons, or raised men from the dead, just as we can respect and admire the heroic elements in the characters of Elijah and Elisha, and yet doubt the historic truth of the fiery chariots at Dothan, or the floating axe-head, or Naaman's cure. Nor do we damage the New Testament more by ceasing to read as historical the story of the man at the gate Beautiful, or of the raising of Dorcas, than we do the Old Testament by taking for legendary or poetical the story of Balaam's ass or the swallowing of Jonah.

But there is a common but vague notion that the two cases are different in respect to the evidence by which they are respectively supported. It is justly said that Numbers, Kings, or Jonah,* is a wholly anonymous book of strictly unknown origin, certainly written several thousand years ago, long before there was such a thing as natural science or scientific history. It has properly no evidence to prove the authenticity of its contents, utterly none to give it authority over the

* Jonah is, of course, a parable or illustrative moral tale, which it is a crime against literature to take historically.

witness of science and reason to-day. No one knows who it is that is vouching in its paragraphs for the wonders it describes any more than we know who wrote the Vedas. It is an honest book, so far as we can judge of it by itself; in default of other accounts of antiquity it may be accepted in the main,— but that is all.

Now all this is substantially true of the books of the New Testament. We do not know with any certainty from what individual authors, or even from what circle of believers, they came, nor precisely under what circumstances they originated. They, too, were written before there was any such thing as natural science or scientific history; certainly their authors came in contact with nothing of this kind. Their mere dates cannot be fixed except by approximations which may vary at least thirty or forty years, and, in case of one, still more. They are in detail often strangely discordant. They betray great incapacity for understanding their subject. They were composed at a time when the minds of men were so prone to demand and discern wonders that it would almost be more of a miracle, had they been free from such stories, than

that they should be historically true, miracles and all. Finally, the faith of the writers, as Jews, was guided by an expectation which expressly demanded miracles in the object of it,— I mean the expectation of the Messiah, whom the Evangelists fully believed Jesus to be.

The case of the New Testament does not, therefore, differ in kind from that of the Old Testament nor seriously in degree. It possesses practically no external evidence which can be extended to substantiate its details. That it is an honest collection of books, that its writers were sincere, well-meaning men, its general internal character forbids us to question. Its main tenor is sufficiently consistent. Its portraiture of Jesus is sufficiently graphic, and his character, as given us, is so remarkable that we can construct a view of him complete enough for wide spiritual purposes. But we certainly know nothing about it, which can oblige us, or, against reason and science permit us, to accept its statements in detail.*

* The following passage is from the pen of a scholarly clergyman of the Church of England. It is worth careful consideration.

"The origin of all the Gospels is wrapped in mys-

The real truth, then, on the question of the evidences of the New Testament books is, with scarcely an exaggeration, this,— they have none. They suffice to place the character of Jesus before us, with a great measure, probably, of correctness, to be received as we can and will; but they have no testimony which so accredits them

tery. The New Testament Epistles . . . contain no quotations from [them] and do not in any way recognize their existence. While oral testimony was a fresh and living voice, they were not called for, and we have no pretence for fancying they appeared till the apostolical generation had nearly died out. They were not at once exalted to the rank accorded to the earlier Scriptures. Though honorably distinguished from other and less truthful records, they did not reach, otherwise than by a gradual progress extending over at least a hundred years, the high place conceded to them in the third and following centuries. And, if we had unimpeachable evidence of their genuineness, and could be sure they were written by the men whose names they bear, we should still have to consider the phenomena they present: the patches of verbal identity in the first three; their want of connected and orderly arrangement; their superficial differences resulting from omissions and slight variations which are not incompatible with historical fidelity; and their marked discrepancies which cannot be reconciled. We are not, moreover, able to deny the possibility and probability of changes, interpolations, and additions in the course of transcription, and we cannot be justified in assuming that we have correct accounts of all events and correct reports of all discourses.

"There was unquestionably an interval of transition from an oral and traditional to a written gospel. . . . At a

as to override the results of later science and more highly developed thought. Their only important evidence is that which is internal to themselves. The religious and moral effect they properly make in one's own mind is all they can be claimed to make. Whatever is at variance with reason or science they are wholly inadequate to sustain.

One of the most famous dicta of literature is that of Hume bearing on the subject we are dis-

time of seething mental commotion and ill-regulated enthusiasm . . . our Gospels were neither tested by the vigilant criticism nor protected by the jealous custody which subsequent veneration too tardily secured. . . . The utmost we can reasonably assume concerning the Gospels is that they are in the main trustworthy, substantially true."—*An Examination of Liddon's Bampton Lectures*, pp. 42, 43.

The same author quotes from another writer of distinction: —

"From the third century we have the testimony of Origen to the *wilful* falsification of Scripture. He writes that the differences of text in the various copies of St. Matthew's Gospel were caused by the carelessness of copyists and the malicious boldness of correcting writers, or of those who had added or had taken away. . . . Origen admits that different versions of St. Matthew's Gospel were, even in the third century, in circulation, and that they originated partly in the activity of gospel-forgers. At the end of the fourth century, St. Jerome writes the same thing about the Latin translation, and says 'there are as many texts as manuscripts.'"—*De Bunsen's Hidden Wisdom of Christ*, Vol. II., p. 109.

cussing. It has been vehemently assailed and abundantly derided, but it remains permanently inexpugnable. It is this, that there is always more probability that testimony should err than that a miracle should take place. Evidence may not be specifically inadequate to substantiate any occurrence whatever; but the nature of human testimony is such that, in every individual case of reported miracle, the chances are stronger against the accuracy and authenticity of the evidence than in favor of the occurrence of a miracle. I say that this position is inexpugnable; yet, after all, it appears from what we have just seen that its assertion is not really needed in the present case. There is absolutely no evidence to be produced adequate to parry for a moment the intrinsic improbability of the miraculous occurrences of the New Testament having occurred as narrated,—that is, having historically occurred as proper miracles.

But, even if there were more evidence than there is, I ask you to observe, from parallel facts, that there hardly could be enough to substantiate them independently of their connection with Jesus; and that, therefore, when men cease

to regard them as necessary to his place in history, they cannot and will not longer be credited. There are actually innumerable instances of miracles which are witnessed by the best human testimony conceivable; from which we cannot logically escape if we deny Hume's dictum; and yet which we do not believe, and which the abundant and accurate testimony that actually accredits them has absolutely no power to sustain against our constitutional incredulity. Mr. Lecky says,—*

"Very few of the minor facts of history are authenticated by as much evidence as the stigmata of St. Francis, or the miracles of the Holy Thorn, or those of the Abbé Paris. We believe with tolerable assurance a crowd of historical events on the testimony of one or two Roman historians, but when Tacitus and Suetonius describe how Vespasian restored a blind man to sight, their deliberate assertions do not even beget in our minds a suspicion that their narrative may be true. We are quite certain that miracles were not ordinary occurrences in classical or mediæval times, but nearly all the contemporary

* History of European Morals, Vol. I., p. 369.

writers from whom we derive our knowledge of those periods were firmly convinced that they were."

Again * he says: —

"To estimate aright the force of the predisposition to the miraculous should be the first task of the enquirer in these subjects; and no one, I think, can examine the subject with impartiality without arriving at the conclusion that it has been in many periods of history so strong as to accumulate around pure delusions an amount of evidence far greater than would be sufficient to establish even improbable natural facts. Through the entire duration of Pagan Rome it was regarded as an unquestionable truth, established by the most ample experience, that prodigies of various kinds announced every memorable event; and that sacrifices had the power of mitigating or arresting calamity. . . . The reality of the witch miracles was established by a critical tribunal which, however imperfect, was at least the most searching then existing in the world; by the judicial decisions of the law-courts of every European country, supported by

* History of European Morals, Vol. I., p. 385.

the unanimous voice of public opinion and corroborated by the investigations of some of the ablest men during several centuries. The belief that the king's touch can cure scrofula flourished in the most brilliant periods of English history. It was unshaken by the most numerous public experiments. It was asserted by the privy council, by the bishops of two religions, by the general voice of the clergy, by the University of Oxford, and by the enthusiastic assent of the people. It survived the ages of the Reformation, of Bacon, of Milton, and of Hobbes. It was by no means extinct in the age of Locke [1632–1704], and would probably have lasted still longer had not the change of dynasty at the Revolution assisted the tardy skepticism."

Until after the age of George I. [1700–1727] the office of healing was printed with the liturgy in the prayer-book of the English Church. Charles II., during his reign, "touched" 100,000 persons; in 1682 he performed the rite 8,500 times; and yet to-day this unanimous voice of past eras is disbelieved. The most authentic testimony conceivable fails to affect our incredulity, in the least, in regard to periods almost

within our own time. Is it not certain that we shall, erelong, as soon as we can disassociate our acceptance of them from our idea of what is reverentially due to Jesus, likewise regard the miracles of the New Testament, whatever we may think of the authenticity of the book, as equally incredible and impossible; equally incapable, I may say, of substantiation by any amount of evidence which can be conceivably procured for any occurrences? Unquestionably this is so.

But what, now, are we to think positively about the miraculous stories of the Bible? That they are honestly narrated we must in the main unhesitatingly admit. Neither in the Old Testament nor in the New do we find extensive traces of anything like dishonesty of purpose. How, then, are the narratives of miracles to be explained?

To this question the fact is that in particular cases we cannot give an unqualified and certain answer. We can only study the tendencies and ideas of the times, and frame theories of the existence of the legendary and mythical in historical narratives. That this is not an irrational posi-

tion, nor one which weakens the force of our rejection of the miraculous in the New Testament, is shown, moreover, by the fact that it is the necessary attitude of all — those who accept as well as those who reject the Christian miracles — in reference to a vastly greater number of miraculous stories which neither party accept. To account for the existence of miraculous narratives in the New Testament is only one instance of the general enquiry, How is it that, the world over, such stories are propagated and believed? The Egyptian and Eastern world was full of miracles, — and is so now ; so was the history of Greece and Rome. The Christian father, Origen, says of Celsus, a famous early antagonist of Christianity, that even "if these things were true which are written about cures, and the raising of the dead, and a few loaves feeding multitudes, Celsus considers them common by the side of things executed by the scholars of the Egyptians, who in the midst of the marketplaces cast out demons, cure diseases, and show as sumptuous feasts things which are not such," etc. And he (Celsus) adds : "Granting that they do these things, must we account them Sons of

God, or not rather conclude that they are wicked and unhappy men?"

Jesus himself makes a remark showing the prevalence of conjury in his day, and also implies, by admitting, that some of the cures ascribed to himself were wrought equally by others of his time. "If I, by Beelzebub, cast out devils, by whom do your sons cast them out?" Simon Magus* had a similar and world-wide reputation for miracle-working, and the religious history of, I suppose, almost every people contains narratives essentially the same with these, our familiarity and associations with which serve to blind us to their true character.

Now, to say just how certain particular stories, really untrue or exaggerated beyond truthfulness, have gained in any case credence, is obviously impossible. We can only, sometimes, plausibly conjecture how they might have happened. We discern beyond question the general tendency to produce and believe accounts of miracles, and on that tendency we can philosophize. But the suggestions of particular miracles, and the mode in which they originated, must vary in each case.

* Acts viii. 9–13.

In regard to the general repute of Jesus as a worker of miracles, it is sufficient to say that it was almost inevitable that those who accepted him as the Messiah should have believed him so endowed. The Messiah's coming was, according to all their traditions, to be attended with prodigies. Even had Jesus sedulously abstained from giving currency to the reports of miraculous works, he could not have prevented the belief in them from spreading wherever he was received as the Christ. It is, indeed, difficult to conceive that he could have obtained extensive acceptance as the Messiah unless he had encouraged this opinion by his acts. The wonder really is, not that there are any miracles narrated in the Bible, but that there are so few, and those so chaste as they are.

Now, then, remembering that the Gospels were written in a wholly unscientific and most credulous age, and not until Jesus had been dead twenty, forty, or a hundred years; not until after his cause had become a wide movement, identifying him with the Hebrew Messiah,— is it not wholly natural, altogether to be expected, that these narratives should contain instances of

miracle? Certainly it is. As I observed before, it would be almost enough to impugn the authenticity of them if they did not.

But, I repeat, just out of what circumstances a particular story grew, it is never possible to decide positively. Sometimes we may suggest explanations which seem probable, and answer well enough the purpose of illustrating the existence of such stories. But we can insist, positively, upon none.

Often, for example, a miracle-story may be only an exaggeration of a natural fact, a mistaken report of an actual occurrence. Thus the miraculous feeding of the three thousand may be explained by supposing that Jesus or his disciples contrived to provide food for them under circumstances so difficult that the people among whom it became known could not believe it to have been done in ordinary ways. Such a story as that of the miraculous draught of fishes may only describe an instance of good judgment, or sudden observation of Jesus where fish were to be obtained. The turning of water into wine may have been only an instance of thoughtful provision by him for a deficient entertainment.

The stilling of the storm and the walking on the water have similar obvious explanations. This method of explanation has been called the "natural" theory,—that is, it seeks out natural explanations for occurrences reported as unnatural. It will answer in a great many cases. Its particular exponent was the celebrated critic Paulus. Perhaps the most notable attempt to explain the miracles of the New Testament is that of Strauss in his "Life of Jesus." This gigantic effort of research and skill may be said to have failed of its specific purpose, but it is one of the remarkable books of the world. It completely exhausts the vein of argument it follows. Its explanation is called the "mythical" theory. It is difficult to explain this in a few words. It is characteristic of it, that it does not assume that the miraculous story grew out of any actual facts, but holds it to be, chiefly, if not wholly, the imaginative product of the mind acting upon the characteristic ideas of the people among whom it springs up. The distinction between the natural and the mythical theories is that the natural theory attempts to show the natural possibility of the occurrence related; the

mythical theory traces the origin of the existing record, the existence and form of the story, to see what tendencies of thought gave rise to it.

Now, each of these modes of explanation may serve to elucidate some of the New Testament miracles. The miracles of healing (which, it is well to remember, largely preponderate in number and verisimilitude), have an obvious natural explanation which makes some of them "thinkable," and for that reason I am not disposed to speak of them all as completely unhistorical and destitute of all foundation in a peculiar exaltation of magnetic gifts in the person of Jesus.

But the main point I urge remains, however these explanations may be extended. They are all directed to the explaining, and the explaining away, of what is properly miracle in the New Testament. And, however we may thus account for them, there should be no indistinctness in our conclusion that the narratives, as they stand, regarded as accounts of actual occurrences, are unhistorical, incredible, not true. The universe is a system of order, into which the intrusion of disorder could never bring significance. A power of thaumaturgy could not reveal spiritual

exaltation nor further the propagation of spiritual truth.

It is very likely that the tendency of modern scholarship is, by affording a more critical view of the New Testament, to diminish the vividness and sharpness of outline which the extant accounts of Jesus now wear. We must be content with this. The question is not, what we should like to have, but what we have. And if a truer understanding of the nature of these literary monuments inspires in us a hesitation which partakes largely of the element of doubt, even on essential points, we may console ourselves with reflecting that intelligent doubt is a higher and more fruitful condition than the certitude which is born of ignorance.

Of the actual history of Jesus we must confess that we have only very imperfect elements. Much must forever remain uncertain or unknown. Yet let us observe that that which is lost pertains almost wholly to the outward man. His alleged miracles add little to our apprehension of his spiritual character. The truth he actually taught, and which his name stands for, remains untouched. It is lofty and most gra-

cious. Though doubtless associated, to some extent, with personal illusions, which he could hardly have escaped, the circuit of his thought embraces almost all the ideas which seem essential to rational, spiritual religion. It is these which really make the history of Jesus invaluable to us, and which have been the saving nucleus of strength in Christianity. His recorded acts of miracle, his resurrection and ascension, will, by degrees, fall into comparative oblivion, through that desuetude which is the silent, effective antagonist of error; but his doctrine of God, his doctrine of love, his parables of the talents, the sower, the leaven, and above all of the good Samaritan and the prodigal son, can by no possibility be forgotten while men have hearts; nor the vividness of their beauty and suggestiveness be unappreciated while spiritual truth and rhetorical skill are able to win admiration among men.

II.

THE ORIGIN OF BELIEF IN MIRACLES.

"God is not the author of confusion."— I. Cor. xiv. 33.

In my recently published sermon on "The New Testament Miracles," a primary purpose was to show that belief in them is not essential to the most genuine reverence for Jesus and appreciation of his actual religious work. If the miracles are unreal, it must be that they can be dissociated from his career not only with safety, but with the highest advantage to our view of him. I went but little way into the question of the origin of miraculous stories in general. I spoke of two or three theories by which particular narratives may plausibly be accounted for. But there is the broader question, which I scarcely touched,— whence comes this whole innumerable array of miraculous narratives, the universal credence of portents, omens, prodigies, which the race of men have, in every nation, invented, and largely believed?

To clear up this question makes the effort to account for a few isolated instances of miraculous stories comparatively superfluous and uninteresting.

There is, perhaps, no subject of thought on which the condition of men's minds has more totally changed than on this. It seems necessary to my purpose to make this observation, for so complete is this transformation that men of the present day hardly even apprehend the actual condition of the early world in regard to the subject. To-day, as a rule, although superstition is not dead, yet of every peculiar phenomenon men diligently search out some natural cause. You dig under or behind it, you analyze and compare, and, if baffled, you do not say "miracle," but that the cause is obscure. In primitive times,— even in times which approach us in the line of our own historical descent within a few generations,— it was quite the reverse. The name of Bacon was the herald of a new order of thought on the subject; but only a herald, for Bacon himself admitted many notions which would to-day excite the derision of school-boys. Before his time the

whole method of nature was miraculous. In every remarkable phenomenon men saw miracle. Comets, earthquakes, eclipses, thunder, were significant portents. Accidental circumstances were ominous; days were lucky or unlucky; the woods and caves and the air were peopled with strange beings; hob-goblins, ghosts, fairies, ghouls, genii, incubi, witches, were as real as kings and queens. Magicians were fully trusted and abjectly feared. Charms and incantations were the means of curing diseases. The insane were possessed of devils, and these were expelled by conjury. Dreams were miraculous revelations. No Roman general would go into battle against the omens any more than Jews would fight upon the Sabbath. Cicero says that there was not a single nation of antiquity but believed in an art by which the future could be foretold. There were oracles in every country. Astrology and alchemy occupied the place of astronomy and chemistry. Men sought for the elixir of life and the philosopher's stone. Constantine was converted to Christianity, and always justified his acceptance of it, not by its intrinsic truth, but by the miracle which attended his conversion.

In the same way they believed in miraculous actions by highly endowed men. I presume the early saints of every nation have been held to perform these. It was so, as you well know, with the Jews,—Moses, Joshua, Elijah, Elisha, and other heroes of Hebrew antiquity performed them. It was so in India,—Krishna and Buddha both performed and experienced a series of miracles strikingly resembling those ascribed to Jesus. It was so in Egypt, whose priests were believed endowed with this power, as, indeed, we learn from the book of Exodus itself. It was so in Greece and Rome,—Apollonius of Tyana, a celebrated pagan saint of early Christian times, whom the pagans opposed to Christ, was believed to have raised the dead, cast out devils, and healed the sick. The Emperor Vespasian was described by Tacitus and Suetonius as restoring the sight and curing the limb of a disabled man by the touch, and the evidence is clear and explicit to the fact.

But the Christians especially claimed this power. In the first three or four centuries all their great saints exercised it. Irenæus, one of the leading Fathers of the church, and greatly re-

lied on by those dealing in Christian evidences, represents the resurrection of the dead as by no means an uncommon event in his time.* This miracle was frequently performed, accompanied by fasting and the prayers of the church; and the persons thus raised lived afterwards, and were well known, for many years. There is no greater authority in the Christian Church universal than Saint Augustine, he is "the ablest and most clear-headed of the fathers," and "a man of undoubted piety," but he solemnly asserts that in his own diocese of Hippo no less than seventy miracles were wrought in two years by the body of Saint Stephen. He gives a catalogue of undoubted miracles, and says that he has selected them from a multitude so great that volumes would be required to relate them all. In this catalogue are no less than five cases of resuscitation from death. He says that miracles were less frequent than formerly, but that many still occurred, and he had witnessed many himself. When a miracle was reported, he ordered a special examination into its circumstances to be made; and he had the deposition of witnesses

* See Gibbon, "Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire," chap. xv.

read publicly to the people. Saint Ambrosius, Archbishop of Milan, had a fierce conflict with the Empress Justina, a partisan of Arius. The case may have been going against him, but in the height of the dispute he declared that it had been revealed to him in a dream that relics were buried in a certain spot. The earth was removed, and a tomb was found filled with blood, containing two gigantic skeletons, their heads severed from their bodies. They were pronounced to be those of two martyrs who had suffered three hundred years before. To prove that they were genuine relics, the bones were brought into contact with a blind man, who immediately saw, and demoniacs, who were cured; the demons, however (who, as appeared from the Gospels where they acknowledged Jesus as Messiah, were supposed to have a supernatural apprehension of the truth), in the first place acknowledging that the relics were genuine, that Saint Ambrose was the deadly enemy of the powers of hell, that the Trinitarian dogma was true, and that those who, like the Arians, doubted it, would be damned. Saint Augustine was present and an eye-witness: he recorded the facts in his works, and spread

the worship of the two saints through Africa. It is needless to add that the enthusiasm excited secured the triumph of Ambrose in his quarrel with the empress.

But the early Christians did not limit their confidence to the miracles of their own side. They as freely conceded the genuineness of those wrought by the Jews and Gentiles. The Jews were celebrated as exorcists, and claimed to have derived their knowledge from Solomon. Josephus, himself a Jew, describes seeing a compatriot named Eleazer draw a demon from the nostrils of a possessed man by means of enchantment. The demon, to prove the miracle, at the command of the magician overthrew a vase of water at some distance. The story, in form, reminds one of the conduct ascribed to Jesus in the miracle of the herd of swine. These pagan miracles the Fathers universally accredited. The Christians only claimed to be superior to the Jews and Gentiles; that by the sign of the cross and the name of Christ they could expel demons too powerful for others to cope with. Tertullian, one of the chief authorities in Christian evidences, challenges the pagans to bring any demoniac whom

the adjurations of any Christian will not cure; and says if these ever fail the Christians may be put to death. The Christians did not disbelieve, either, the reality of the pagan oracles; but believed them silenced and metamorphosed. A long series of oracles were cited predicting the sufferings of Christ. The prophecies forged by the Christians, and attributed to the heathen Sibyls, were accepted by the entire church and continually appealed to as among the most powerful evidences of their faith. They were second only to the Bible in popular estimation. Clement of Alexandria says that Saint Paul urged the Christians to study them. Constantine adduced them as evidence in a solemn speech at Nicæa in A.D. 325, at the council at which the doctrine of the deity of Christ was established as a dogma of the church. The pagans denounced them as forgeries; but there is not a single writer of the patristic period who disputes them, and very few who fail to appeal to them in like manner as they appealed to the Scriptures.

These writings retained credit, in fact, to a very late period. An allusion to them is found in the most beautiful lyric of the Missal, and

Michael Angelo put the pictures of the Sibyls in alternation with those of the prophets on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. It was in A.D. 1649 that the Sibylline books were first denounced as forgeries by a French Protestant minister named Blondel.

I cannot take time to continue these illustrations, which might be indefinitely multiplied.* Let us turn now to study the sources of the belief in miracle, and the possibility of such stories being circulated and generally believed.

As I remarked before, the universal habit in modern times, when any remarkable phenomenon is observed and reported, is to look out for a cause. Substantially, however, the same thing is true of all times. There is in the mind a natural instinct to seek out the origin of things observed.

Now, in modern times, when this impulse comes up in our minds, we have an immediate resource for explanation of facts. We recur to natural law. If the law is already known, it may suffice to elucidate any phenomenon newly subjected to our investigation. If it is not, we

* See for most of the above illustrations, Lecky, History of European Morals, Vol. I., *ad loc.*

are nevertheless so accustomed to this system, that we are entirely capable, and are disposed, to wait till it shall be discovered. In fact, we all of us daily live in the presence of phenomena of which we are individually incapable of giving an explanation, but we know, or suppose, that it can be given by some one, and we refer it to the appropriate science, as if we understood it ourselves. But as we look back a century or two, we have to put ourselves into a wholly different state of mind, and to conceive, as we have seen, a wholly different state of things. Remember, as you approach the question, how wonderful all the phenomena of nature really are. Even the simplest,— the sunrise, the sailing moon, water freezing, steam, the wind, the lightning. Suppose yourself in the presence of these with absolutely no knowledge of what they are, or the way in which they take place; relinquish all knowledge that the sun is a glowing orb of matter millions of miles off; look at the sky and see it, as it seems, a solid vault, a firmament; see the rain fall from no visible source; see the comet flare out in the heaven; see spring return and the trees coming to life; see sickness strike

down a strong man; see an epileptic or insane man, — in short, divest yourself of all that you to-day know of the nature and reasons of phenomena, and reflect how mysterious they would be, how appalling many of them would be, how suggestive of personal agency many of them would be. Now, bearing this wonderfulness and mystery of nature in mind, we must recall the mental condition in which men stood before it, and have stood, indeed, almost to our day. Remember that natural science is, in all its branches, one of the most modern of achievements. Geology, chemistry, astronomy, physiology, optics, acoustics, zoölogy, botany, all of these are products of a few recent generations. Our remoter ancestors had literally no such standards of reference by which to test or explain the things they saw. The system of philosophy which ruled all European thought down to Bacon's time proceeded by the assumption — that is, the mere imagination — of certain primary ideas, and thence it built up a universe, wholly fanciful and visionary. The common man had nothing but his own guess or fancy and the wondering guesses and fancies of his neighbors to

guide him. What was the most natural theory for him to frame? Was he likely to leap to that gigantic conception of a universe of law and orderly force which is the glory of to-day? Most certainly not. To the man of early times, this earth is the principal figure in the universe; the sun is a travelling fire; the stars are glittering punctures in or shining lamps hung against the solid vault of heaven; and the processes of nature are far more simply referred to personal agencies than to impersonal forces. There is no obvious unity or consistency and connection among natural phenomena, — no reason for repelling the idea of disorder or malevolence or caprice. He has no idea of a single divine source of force. Each phenomenon is interpreted, without reference to others, as his own fancy or his own fear guides him. Hence the first theory of the government of the universe and the processes of nature is obviously and essentially miraculous; and this element was only to be eliminated from men's notions by precisely those long, patient, innumerable experiments and observations which have at length brought us where we are. We should remember there is nothing

essentially irrational in a miraculous theory. It involves no logical absurdity. Considered abstractly, it is perfectly conceivable that there should be spirits good and bad about us, operating strange effects; that providence should announce great events by prodigies and should endow individuals with exceptional miraculous powers. Our whole view to the contrary of this is the product of science. In the time of Elijah, a fiery chariot was as reasonable an object of belief as a discharge of electricity. In fact, down to a very recent period, the miraculous theory had a far greater reasonableness than that of natural law.

"We must remember," says Mr. Lecky, "that before men had found the key to the motions of the heavenly bodies,— before the false theory of the vortices, or the true theory of gravitation, when the multitude of apparently capricious phenomena was very great,— the notion that the world was governed by distinct and isolated influences was that which appeared most probable even to the most rational intellect. In such a condition of knowledge,— which was that of the most enlightened days of the Roman Em-

pire,—the hypothesis of natural law was justly regarded as a rash and premature generalization. Every enquirer was confronted with innumerable phenomena which were deemed plainly miraculous. When Lucretius sought to banish the supernatural from the universe, he was compelled to employ much ingenuity in endeavoring to explain, by a natural law, why a miraculous fountain near the temple of Jupiter Ammon was hot by night and cold by day, and why the temperature of wells was higher in winter than in summer." *

If we thus transfer ourselves to the actual past (of which, indeed, history, written to detail only politics and war, has really given us so imperfect an idea), we shall see that men's notions of the causes of things must necessarily have been most inadequate, contradictory, and, in the light of modern science, absurd. Moreover, that the explanation of the phenomena of nature, by reference to the personal agency of gods or demons or other invisible beings, was the most natural readily to be obtained.

But if, further, we take into account some of

* History of European Morals, Vol. I., p. 389.

the obvious dispositions of the mind, we shall see that, in early times, there would actually be a preference of an hypothesis involving miracle over one presenting only the arid conception of natural law. Some critics say, I believe, that a familiar text should be translated not "I am fearfully and wonderfully made," but "I am made to fear and wonder." At any rate this disposition of the mind to accept and delight in the marvellous is as fixed and important an element in the question before us as any which enters into it. Intelligent writers on the subject, as I remarked before, pronounce the disposition to the marvellous the most important element in the question. "It has been in many periods of history," says Mr. Lecky, "so strong as to accumulate around pure delusions an amount of evidence far greater than would suffice to establish even important matters of fact." Of this a good illustration is found in the case of witchcraft. The evidence and the argumentation in favor of its reality, for six or eight centuries, was far stronger than that against it. If you should decide the question of its reality on the evidence, you must admit it

to-day. But you have no doubt that all this evidence is really the product of the disposition to believe the marvellous. This disposition still exists. Unless the explanation by natural law be obvious and forthcoming, men of to-day, we ourselves, have an instinct to leap at once to the other. We do it in feeling, if not in thought. The unexplained phenomenon affects us with a sort of vague awe and dread. The dark, changing the look of familiar objects, gives every one a vague sense of fear. How often the howling wind, beating at night against the windows and whistling down the chimney, brings irresistibly a sudden sense of some strange and horrid spirit outside the house. "Man instinctively ascribes volition to whatever powerfully affects him," and volition implies personality. The tendency to explain phenomena as miraculous may be referred partly, also, to the religious instinct, prone to interpret God, but unable in early times to rise to the conception of a purely spiritual, single deity. The agency of God in the works of nature is translated into the personal presence there of divine or demoniac agents; and the

phenomena of nature are interpreted as the specific acts of such personal agents. Even peculiar emotions of mind are readily referred to the same source.

Now, when the miraculous view of nature is held undisturbedly, it is obvious, as I said before, that there is no standard of probability or reasonableness like that which we have to-day in natural science; and hence that there is nothing to prevent the acceptance of any story, however remarkable. No hearer could plead, or would think of pleading, that any narrative, however strange, was absurd or any alleged event impossible. There would be absolutely no ground for, or reason in, such a plea, and no possible justification of it. On the contrary, one story would in itself be as credible as another; and the more marvellous would stand practically the better chance of circulation. The hearer would be more interested in it, as it would tickle his love of the marvellous; and the teller would find himself aggrandized by the wonders of which he should be the vehicle.

Further, therefore, there being no such thing, theoretically or practically, as scientific incre-

dulity, there would obviously be no strong motive for, and therefore no habit of careful scrutiny of, any strange reports. The mere tendency to exaggerate in narration would not be checked by the fear of disbelief or ridicule. And thus the sense of responsibility to truth, the habit of truthfulness, would lose its practical culture.

All these results have actually been realized in history. Who supposes that for a thousandth part of the miracles of history there has been anything like careful scrutiny of evidence, careful cross-examination of witnesses? They have been universally reported to crowds eager to believe them, with added exaggerations. Here and there church dignitaries have made a show, or an effort, in this direction; but the very few accounts of such examinations which are to be found show us those only leading in them who were naturally interested in favor of the probability of the story, and at all events wholly unprotected by any scientific sense against imposture and delusion.

But had there been, historically, more care exercised than there is any evidence that there has been, I remind you that the sifting of evi-

dence is one of the most difficult arts, and in past times those who have attempted it, in the case of marvellous stories, had, as I have been showing, actually no proper scientific furniture with which to perform their task.

In regard to mere truthfulness these scientific deficiencies have been of great practical importance. It is a fact that the sense of obligation to truth and accuracy in narrative is to a wide extent a modern product. To be true to one's pledge is an old virtue; but to forge or invent stories, even with a purpose, was not in ancient times regarded as a serious crime. To alter, interpolate, and otherwise manipulate texts; to write a book and ascribe it to a person of renown, — were not only venial, but wholly proper, and very customary acts. The very sense of accuracy, the mental habit by which one regulates the imagination and restrains it from manipulating memory, was undoubtedly far less highly developed anciently than at present, — much as it still needs culture. The masses who should report any strange event had, in primitive times, scarcely any mental check upon the vagaries of their own imaginations, or their im-

pulsive or wilful exaggerations of their own reports.

But we have this besides. It is under the pressure of the scientific sentiment that care in actual observation is secured, and the powers of observation trained. So long as one explanation is, on general grounds, as credible as another, the most obvious will be accepted, or any to which caprice or prejudice incline. The observer will not feel held, or impelled, to prosecute his researches to any extreme of thoroughness or nicety until he is impressed with the importance of scientific accuracy and is convinced that a true theory can only be obtained when the object is exhaustively studied. But a report of anything is trustworthy only in proportion as it has been thus critically investigated. And, in fact, observation itself, like the examination of evidence, is an art of a high order. Merely to see is not to observe. The reports of a very ordinary occurrence, given one by several witnesses, seldom fail to betray how imperfectly we take cognizance of what is actually before our eyes. In fact, that one is an eye-witness of anything is only a part — I might almost say, a small part —

of what is requisite. The question is, how far one is really qualified to observe what occurs before him. Hermann, the juggler, watching Kellar, would give a very different report of what he saw from what you or I would. He would see a hundred things we should not see. So, conversely, a man of intelligence, two thousand years ago, would believe he saw, daily, a hundred marvellous things which you and I would never dream of having seen.

For this defective and uneducated power of observation we have to make wide allowance. It is almost incredible, in fact, what strange beliefs it permits to grow up and keep their place. The history of superstition is an illustration of it. As I have already remarked, all Rome for centuries believed that prodigies announced every important event; they believed in the validity of the oracles; eclipses were supposed to foreshadow calamity. The Emperor Augustus, one of the most intelligent men of his time, in obedience to dreams, went begging money through the streets of Rome, and wore a sea-calf's skin to protect himself against thunder. The augers noted eleven different kinds of lightning as sig-

nifying different things. Pliny and Lucretius gravely declare that the fiercest lion trembles at the crowing of a cock. The stag became an emblem of Christ because it was said to draw serpents from their holes by its breath, and trample them to death. The remora, or echinus, or sea-urchin, was believed to be able, if it fastened on the keel of a ship, to stop its course, even when driven by a tempest. The human saliva has always been endowed with miraculous qualities. If a man, fasting, spat on the mouth of a serpent, the serpent died. Saliva was regarded as a sovereign cure for ophthalmia; and most miracles of curing blindness, like those in the New Testament, involve its use. If a pugilist, having struck his adversary, spat in his own hands, the pain he had caused instantly ceased. If he did so before striking, the blow was more severe.* Aristotle, the greatest naturalist of Greece, observed that no animal ever died upon the seashore except during the ebbing of the tide. Pliny directed his attention to the subject several centuries later, but declared, after careful observations, that Aristotle's statement was inaccu-

* This custom still survives in the pugilist's ring.

rate, being true not of the animals, but only of men. In 1727, scientific observations at Brest and Rochefort finally dissipated the delusion in the minds of scientific men; but it survives, and a great novelist refers to it in a touching passage, saying of a departing character, "It being high water, he went out with the tide." *

The belief in witches is another example of a delusion which flourished several centuries, supported by the unanimous consent of the people, and even resisting the most searching scrutiny of the ablest men of the times. And an almost more remarkable example is that which I also referred to before, of the cure of scrofula by the king's touch, which flourished for centuries during the most brilliant period of English history.†

Now all these and myriad like instances are

* See all these and many like instances in Lecky, History of European Morals, Vol. I., pp. 385–395, etc. On witchcraft, see also his History of Rationalism, Vol. I., chaps. i.–iii.

† "Touching" was constantly performed in the most public manner. There was a solemn ritual, divines attended in full canonicals, and multitudes looked on. Charles II. touched, during his reign, 92,107 persons. James touched 800 persons in the choir of Chester Cathedral. See Macaulay's History of England, chap. xiv., and Lecky, Vol. I., pp. 386 and 387.

simply examples of defective observation. Every one of them could have been corrected by accurate observation, and most of them have been. But they continued in the general acceptance of men of all classes for many centuries.

I repeat, then, the fact that an event as described by an eye-witness is by no means a certificate that the account we have of it is correct. We must know our witnesses and their qualifications to observe, before we can place implicit reliance on their literal statements.

So far, then, as I have now advanced, our discussion may be summed up thus: the belief in miracles is essentially only rudimentary science. It is the first imperfect generalization from phenomena observed, or which are supposed to have been observed. Men instinctively frame a theory of phenomena; the most ready, and in primitive times the most reasonable, is that which refers them to isolated personal agency. This solution, moulded and inflated by men's natural love of the marvellous, is in early times uncorrected by skill in scientific observation or in scientific examination of evidence. And thus we have that universal belief in miracle which has

characterized all ages, and cannot be said to be extinct to-day.

But observe, our discussion has implied a principle which should be stated expressly. The application of this theory of phenomena does by no means remain restricted to such phenomena as actually occur. It is the tendency of every belief entertained to produce artificial facts corresponding to itself. This is the gist of the elaborate theory of Strauss in regard to the miracles of the New Testament. The scientist who sets out with a theory to sustain will find facts to sustain it, just as the dogmatist who ransacks Scripture always finds texts sufficient to justify his creed. And the idea of government by miracle having become established in men's minds, there was an obvious opening offered for the upgrowth of stories of a miraculous nature, founded upon no observation at all, the pure product of excited or irregulated or merely puerile imagination. Belief in a particular cause has a tendency to generate narratives corresponding to the supposed cause. To-day the believer in special providence is constantly discovering them. And even the ancients remarked that, in times

of excitement when men expected prodigies, prodigies always increased in number. It is this secondary process which has produced the mass of extant narratives of miracle. And while many of these are very possibly the exaggerations of natural facts, this tendency — the tendency to originate wholly unfounded narratives — is that which is most properly to be described as the philosophy of miracle story.

It certainly appears remarkable that in every nation narratives wholly or substantially fictitious should be so extensively received as true and exercise so important an influence. But that they have done so, I have perhaps sufficiently exhibited, and the possibility of it has in part been explained. Belief in miracles has never depended on the production of their evidences. Miracles are believed in spite of evidence. The same persons who accept the miracles of the Bible, for which no proper evidence can be pretended, refuse to accept the miracles of modern spiritism, which can bring forward abundant evidence. The belief in miracles declines with the advance of civilization, but not properly because their evi-

dences are dissipated. The real reason is that a new theory of the universe and its government is gradually substituted by the progress of science.

The belief in miracles is, therefore, to be connected with the development of society. "When men are destitute of the critical spirit, when the notion of uniform law is yet unborn, and when their imaginations are incapable of rising to abstract ideas, histories of miracles are always formed and always believed; and they continue to flourish till these conditions are altered. Miracles cease when men cease to believe and expect them. In periods equally credulous, they multiply or diminish in proportion to the intensity with which the imagination is directed to theological topics." *

The real refutation of miracles is, therefore, not the disproof of them as particular accounts, but, as Lecky convincingly shows, by the reference of them, in mass, to this general law of mental development. We discern them to be "the normal expression of a certain stage of knowledge or intellectual power, and this ex-

*Lecky, History of European Morals, Vol. I., p. 373.

planation is their refutation. We do not say they are impossible, or that they are not authenticated by as much evidence as many facts which we believe. We only say that, in certain conditions of society, illusions of this kind inevitably appear." *

Mr. Lecky, from whom I have drawn so largely both for my illustrations and my arguments, illustrates this position most skilfully, by a reference which I cannot forbear quoting, to "a sphere which," as he remarks, "is happily removed from controversy." This is the realm of fairyland. He says: —

"There are very few persons with whom the reality of fairy tales has not ceased to be a question, or who would hesitate to disbelieve, or even to ridicule, any anecdote of this nature which was told them, without the very smallest examination of its evidence. Yet, if we ask in what respect the existence of fairies is naturally contradictory or absurd, it would be difficult to answer the question. A fairy is simply a being possessing a moderate share of human intelligence, with little or no moral faculty, with a

*Lecky, History of European Morals, Vol. I., p. 374.

body pellucid, winged, and volatile, like that of an insect, with a passion for dancing, and with, perhaps, an extraordinary knowledge of the properties of plants. That such beings should exist, or, existing, should be able to do many things beyond human power, are propositions which do not present the smallest difficulty. For many centuries their existence was almost universally believed. There is not a country, not a province, scarcely a parish, where traditions of their appearance were not long preserved. So great a weight of tradition, so many independent trains of evidence attending statements free from intrinsic absurdity, or even improbability, would appear sufficient, if not to establish convictions, at least to supply a very strong *prima facie* case, and ensure a patient and respectful investigation of the subject.

"It has not done so, and the reason is sufficiently plain. The question of the credibility of fairy tales has not been resolved by an examination of evidence, but by an observation of the laws of historic development. Wherever we find an ignorant and rustic population, the belief in fairies is found to exist, and circum-

stantial accounts of their appearance are circulated. But, invariably, with increased education, this belief passes away. It is not that the fairy tales are refuted or explained away or even narrowly scrutinized. It is that the fairies cease to appear. From the uniformity of this decline, we infer that fairy tales are the normal product of a certain condition of the imagination; and this position is raised to a moral certainty when we find that the decadence of fairy tales is but one of a long series of similar transformations." *

With these observations of the past, the future of opinion in respect to miracles is not difficult to forecast.

As has been the case with the mass of them already, as Catholic Christians have ceased to acknowledge the pagan miracles, as Protestant Christians have ceased to believe the Catholic ones, as moderns have ceased to believe all present miracles and all ancient ones, save the few related in the Bible, so a theory of reconciliation between science and religion must certainly soon be attained, which will permit the

* Lecky, History of European Morals, Vol. I., pp. 370-371.

exclusion of all such tales from literal acceptation. If, out of the millions which have been believed, only the forty or fifty miracles which the Bible relates are true, they are indeed miracles! The scientific spirit has not yet, indeed, so far extended popularly but that it is possible for many to hold to these, while rejecting all others; and, as I remarked before, a sentimental piety is touched by the removal of any striking, although unreal, attribute from our portrait of Jesus. But from what we have seen, I think it is not strange, on the one hand, that the element of miracle should have connected itself with a history enacted and recorded in a period so long anterior to the birth of physical science as the Christian era. Nor can I doubt, on the other, that the intelligent mind of the present day is fast advancing to the point where (conscious that nothing is sacred but truth) it will feel capable of disentangling the real from the unreal in the remarkable biography of Jesus, and of retaining his spiritual truth and moral inspiration, while it refers to the fictive imagination of the past his reputed power of miracle.

III.

THE MYTH OF THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS.*

"I call any story a myth which for good reasons is not to be taken historically, and yet is not a wilful fabrication with intent to deceive, but the natural growth of wonder and tradition, or a product of the Spirit uttering itself in a narrative form."—REV. FREDERIC H. HEDGE, D.D.

AT this beautiful spring season the people of the Christian world very generally unite to celebrate the supposed resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

Influenced by association and sympathy, and by the love of a festal occasion, many of our Unitarian congregations, including our own, are wont to mark the period with tokens of gladness and services of rejoicing.

In most cases, I think, our people attempt to make some discriminations as to their motives in participating in the Easter occasion. They seek to give to it the significance of a celebration of

* An Easter Sermon.

the revived life of nature in the spring, or the deeper sentiment of a festival of human immortality.

It is, I fear, difficult to make such discriminations clear; and, as I have reason to think that, at present, belief in the resurrection of Jesus does not widely prevail among you, as I myself unqualifiedly disbelieve in the event, I feel it to be a duty to myself (and perhaps it is such to you) to state formally the dissenting view in regard to this crowning miracle of the traditional history of Jesus.

I do not believe that Jesus rose from the dead, except by that spiritual resurrection by which all the children of men, on the dissolution of the body, pass into a new life beyond the grave.

The story of his physical and earthly resurrection is, in my judgment, mythical, not historical.

In this opinion in regard to the narrative I suppose that I am accompanied by the large majority of the clergy of our Church, and equally by the large majority of our laity. Our scholars are, I think, unanimous in the same view. To state the position of liberal scholars in a

word, they find it easier to account for the existence of the resurrection narrative as a myth than to justify so exceptional an occurrence as historical on the evidence on which it rests.

Prominent among such scholars, and one of the latest to discuss the story in detail, is the venerable James Martineau, of England, the most spiritual of our preachers, perhaps the ablest of English metaphysicians, and who has brought his scholarship down to the latest date; who in his "Seat of Authority in Religion" examines this question elaborately, and convincingly exhibits the mythical character of the resurrection story.

A more recent work by Professor J. Estlin Carpenter, of Oxford, occupies the same position, and clearly exhibits the mode of development of the whole mythical element in the New Testament.

Even among members of the Orthodox Christian communion the beginnings of the same process of thought are plainly seen, which, by explaining, explains away the miraculous element in these ancient narratives.

As was said many years ago by an eminent

scholar and preacher of our body, the miraculous element is no longer a prop and support of the Christian tradition. It is a weight which Christianity has to carry. Jesus is not believed because he worked the miracles. The miracles are believed because men are reluctant to detach from his revered personality any elements which have been felt to contribute to its dignity.

Elsewhere, certainly outside the Bible, the Protestant world of to-day unanimously rejects all miracles.* The Catholic Church professes to believe them of many of her saints of the present as well as of former generations. In this she is more consistent, for the one effective philosophical argument for the miracles of the New Testament — that on which Dr. Furness rested, and which he made so forcible and suggestive — is that which makes them still a part of the

* But in 1748 the denial of the post-apostolic miracles by Middleton occasioned as profound a shock to religious sensibility as did the publication of Strauss's mythical theory of the gospel miracles in 1835. In the third century a similar treatment, by Origen, of the Old Testament narrative equally offended the religious world. See Rev. Dr. Hedge's admirable discussion of the mythical element in the New Testament in his "Ways of the Spirit," where the spiritual truth and value which may attach to myths is luminously shown.

order of nature,— operations wrought by powerful human wills in virtue of a high spirituality and of unfamiliar but genuine natural laws. This obviously justifies the expectation of such works by other men of exceptional spiritual and moral force, as well as by Jesus and the Apostles.

In this expectation, however, we are disappointed. Protestantism, at least, does not find authentic modern instances of miracle. Even the miracles of the New Testament, other than those of Jesus, are seldom, I think, enlarged upon, if maintained, by our modern scholars; and I doubt if intelligent and educated Romanists believe very heartily in those of to-day which are reported among their communion.

The position upon which I rest in the discussion of the present question is this. The story of the resurrection of Jesus is only a part of the tissue of miracle which a credulous, unscientific age wove instinctively into the tradition of his life and death. It grew out of the same causes, its acceptance and propagation depended on the same conditions, as did the others. While the legend of the miraculous birth, with its attend-

ant angelic phenomena, is more fanciful, it is of exactly the same kind of narratives; and, while the Christian consciousness, by a refined and elevated instinct, dismissed the trivial stories preserved to us in the apocryphal New Testament, these are also of the same kind, originating in the same way, and only differing in their want of dignity and suggestiveness.

I have heretofore, as exhaustively as I was able, discussed with you the origin of the belief in miracles and the particular subject of the miracles of the New Testament. I will not detain you now to traverse the same ground again. If you share, as I suppose you do, the present wide-spread incredulity on this subject, you are fully justified by the famous dictum of an acute philosopher of the past century, whose skeptical vein made him odious, but who in one brief logical statement exhausted the argument. Hume maintained that, in every case of alleged miracle, it is more likely that testimony should err than that a miracle should have occurred.*

* Hume's exact language is "that no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind that its falsehood would be more miraculous than the fact which it endeavors to establish. And even

The Christian world has struggled with this pregnant aphorism for a hundred and fifty years, but it has not escaped from it. Instinctive recognition of the truth which it pithily expresses has led to a steady decline of belief in the miraculous as science, intelligence, and culture have advanced.

The result is admirably exhibited by Lecky in his "History of European Morals," where his examination of the subject of miracle is as luminous as it is convincing. In the face of whatever evidence there is, belief in miracle always declines with growing popular intelligence. Lecky's remarkable discussion may also be summed up in a dictum. It is not, he shows, that the occurrence of miracles is discredited by argument; it is that, as intelligence advances, miracles cease to occur.*

It has not been, indeed, by demonstration of their scientific improbability that the miracles of the New Testament have lost credit with so

in that case there is a mutual destruction of arguments, and the superior only gives us an assurance suitable to that degree of force which remains after deducting the inferior."

*Lecky's History of European Morals, Vol. I., pp. 368 and following.

many persons. It must be admitted that, on sufficient evidence, we must believe anything, no matter how unusual or how subversive of what we have hitherto determined. In these days of science we all understand and acknowledge this. We cannot pretend to limit by former experience the scope of the unknown forces of nature or of the mind.

But the ground has simply been taken from beneath the Scripture miracles of either Testament, and others, by our better understanding of the nature of the writings in which their occurrence is recorded, and of the working of men's minds in unscientific periods and in circumstances like those of the early followers of Jesus.

That in the New Testament we have a body of thoroughly innocent writings, documents essentially genuine, and in spirit, purpose and intention, truthful, is a statement which no one would seriously qualify.

Here are invaluable relics of the literature which grew up, as any such literature grows up, in the first century or two of Christianity; but the popular idea of what these writings individ-

ually are, how they were composed, what is their authority as testimony, is probably very imperfect, if not incorrect. Putting aside all question of their miraculous inspiration, which I need not consider here, the documents of the New Testament present to the student a problem in many respects very intricate.

The Gospels, with which we are now chiefly concerned, appear to the superficial reader as the artless accounts, by well-informed persons, of the life and preaching of Jesus as they had severally known them. We are accustomed to read these narratives as if they came, in form and directly, from the hands of his companions or near contemporaries. Tradition sanctions this view. But, so stated, it requires careful qualifications. The first three Gospels, in their present form, date, probably, from periods ranging from forty to seventy years after Jesus' death. It is possible that portions of their contents were even written down earlier,— perhaps considerably earlier,— or that they were founded, partly, on earlier narratives. But, in the largest part, at least, the traditions of Jesus' life and words had survived orally, and so continued,

doubtless, for a generation, perhaps for half a century.* As we possess them, these first three Gospels are not, as they perhaps seem, the accounts by their authors of what they personally knew of Jesus, his life and his death. What is true is this. The first three Gospels contain the popular traditions which were current in the Christian community concerning Jesus about half a century after he had passed away. They preserve for us what was then generally believed about him. They include exquisite fragments of his remembered utterances. They contain hints enough of his character to enable us to form a very distinct and trustworthy portrait of him, which is immeasurably precious. But, after all, they are properly described, not as careful biographies by competent, nearly contemporary witnesses, but as anonymous compilations of the traditions of their period.

Thus these writings reflect their period. They are, in a literary sense, artless. They are beyond cavil, truthful in spirit and purpose; but they preserve the biography of Jesus as affected by

* Westcott's "Introduction to the Study of the Gospels," pp. 181 and following; Carpenter's "First Three Gospels," p. 61.

all the prepossessions of such an age, and by the ideas and theories which had begun to grow up about him, including, naturally and inevitably, the element of miracle, the marvellous, the supernatural.

They could not have come from that age, and not have included this element. It was alive and ubiquitous in the thought of that period. It was expected and looked for in any remarkable career. Of any exceptional man who should present himself as a religious leader, the people were prompt to ask, "What sign showest thou, that we may believe?" * Miracle being a thing of every-day life in men's belief, its supposed manifestations were described as naturally and artlessly as any other events.

The Fourth Gospel is to be distinguished in some important respects from the other three. It is not merely a compilation of popular traditions and relics of Jesus, such as Luke in his preface expressly describes his own narrative to be, and implies that the others were. The Fourth dates from a much later period,—say A.D. 140,—and

* John vi. 30; also ii. 18. See also Matt. xii. 28; Mark viii. 11; Luke xi. 16, etc.

is properly a tract, written with a purpose, which it candidly avows (chap. xx. 31), to exhibit Jesus in a peculiar character, as the Hebrew Messiah and the Son of God. It is the work of a single hand,* and, as such, possesses unity, homogeneousness, and consecutiveness in its literary structure. But the tradition that it is by one of the twelve apostles, stoutly as it is defended, is actually a most slender thread, and is visibly yielding to the strain which modern scholarship is putting upon it. For one, I do not believe this Gospel to be by an apostle. So far as its historical contents are concerned, then, they are still, in substance, like those of the others. They are still no more than the current popular tradition, amplified and developed by the passage of another half-century. The Fourth Gospel adds nothing to the validity of the testimony of the other three. In fact, its comparative literary artificiality, its later date, and the fact that it was written with an avowed dogmatic purpose, characteristic of a developed stage of Christian opinion, diminish the value

*And one much too highly cultivated, I cannot but think, for that of a Galilean fisherman.

of its historical testimony. It cannot be appealed to with the confidence with which we refer to the others for historical evidence.

To repeat, then, what we have in the Gospels is substantially this,— a compilation of the traditions which were floating in the Christian community forty, fifty, sixty, or a hundred or a hundred and fifty years after Jesus' death, and of the relics preserved of his teachings; these materials, originally fragmentary and anonymous, edited and connected together by sympathetic and intelligent hands with such art as they had. They possess, in their details, not the authority which belongs to the asseverations of a trustworthy eye-witness, but the value which attaches to the popular traditions of a sincere, innocent, and adoring, but credulous, unscientific, easily deluded community of disciples, more than ready to believe miraculous tales.

It is utterly impracticable for the intelligent mind of the present day to be overborne in its judgment of the ways of God by the testimony of such authorities, or would be so but for the influence of custom and of the long-established

veneration which these documents have naturally secured. As containing all that we know of Jesus and his utterances, they are beyond estimate precious. We may be infinitely grateful to have so much. We can but admire their simplicity, their candor, their purity, dignity and grace. But such popular traditions, however charmingly composed, cannot command our belief at points where they would overset all that, in the brightest light of the present age, we seem to know of God and nature. And, fortunately, it is now possible to analyze them, and largely to account for the phenomena which they present.

Compendiously stated, it is the result of recent scholarship to show with much clearness how the more marvellous characteristics attributed to the person and career of Jesus are the reflection back upon them of a subsequent period, when the popular faith had highly, but unnaturally, exalted him, and popular imagination had had time to develop the simple facts of his actual career into the remarkable forms which, at certain points, his story has come to wear.

It is impossible now to tell just what Jesus'

disciples thought of him while living; for we have no unqualified testimony to this point, all our testimony having been worked over in the popular mind repeatedly before it took its existing forms of statement. But the things of a marvellous nature recorded in the Gospels, if true, must have been known to his actual companions and early disciples,— for example, his miraculous birth and its attendant prodigies, the visit of the wise men, the descent of the Holy Spirit as a dove at his baptism, and the attestation of his peculiar sonship to God: yet of these things there is no trace in the body of the Gospels, where the life of the apostles with their Master is recorded. They are never even referred to, much less appealed to, in justification of any claims of a supernatural quality or commission for Jesus. They are obviously myths, which grew up in later day, and were projected back into the history from the time when Jesus was fully established as a supernatural character in the faith of his people. This is very generally admitted, of the events I just specified, by intelligent persons to-day.

But the same, I would have you see, is essen-

tially true of all the rest of the miraculous element in the story of Jesus. If we had the real facts, uncolored by tradition and credulous imagination, we should probably find that Jesus' actual followers neither knew him to work miracles, nor perhaps so believed while he was with them. But they wondered at his great endowments. They began to theorize about him and to think him some peculiar being. They accepted him as the Messiah of the Jews, and the next age made him the Son of God. Then the events of his life took on, by degrees, supernatural quality and form and color. The ardent faith of his followers inevitably, but insensibly, filled out the picture of his life and deeds with details imperceptibly growing, into which the miraculous largely entered. What was natural became supernatural. Incidents wholly mythical attached themselves to the story. And in this condition we have received it.

This process, as I intimate, was in no sense intentional or dishonest. It was by the spontaneous action of the mental and moral forces of such a time. It is by no means peculiar to

the case of Jesus, but paralleled in many others.* We can even see it, in qualified forms, going on around ourselves in the cases of individuals who become highly idealized in the popular imagination. It is even a little less extensive in its results in Jesus' case than we usually suppose. The purely thaumaturgic miracles ascribed to him, like the turning of water to wine, the blasting of the fig-tree and the stilling of the storm, are quite few. A number of the others are plainly misconceptions or exaggerations of natural facts, as the finding of money in the fish's mouth or his walking on the water. The great bulk of the miracles are those of healing, and may almost all represent a power of influence over the minds of the sick, which in its essence would not be uncongenial to so elevated and forcible a character as his, and which is exaggerated rather than perverted in the reports of it which we have received.

But, in the form which they wear, these stories are plainly mythical growths, the product chiefly, if not wholly, of the period succeeding the death of Jesus, when faith in him had

*See Carpenter's "First Three Gospels," p. 152, following, and p. 204.

become intense; when he was fully believed in as a special and supernatural character; when he was eagerly expected to return from heaven, put an end to the existing order of things, and reign with his saints in a glorified state, age-long.

The only wonder is that the miracle stories of the New Testament are not more extravagant than they are. No doubt there was a large body of others, of a more melodramatic quality, like those preserved in the Apocryphal Gospels, which the Christian consciousness, as I have already said, rejected as trivial and unworthy before the canon of the New Testament was closed. Stories of this inferior sort maintained credit with the less educated of the Christian people, as to-day ignorant Catholics believe many fanciful tales of the Madonna and the saints which their educated fellow-churchmen deride. The superior minds (as those must have been who addressed themselves to the compilation of Jesus' story in these four standard biographies) naturally rejected almost all of these.*

*I may say here that the history of myths abundantly shows that the period between the death of Jesus and the publication of the earliest of the Gospels provides more than ample time for the forces which produce the

Here, then, is what I would have you observe. Our modern consciousness does but reject the whole miraculous element of these and other ancient traditions as that of the early Church rejected the more absurd and undignified stories of the kind which popular belief attached to the history of Jesus.

To the modern mind all tales of miracles are trivial.

It is a tempting but always treacherous task to try to account for the origin and growth of particular mythical stories. It has been well that this task should be essayed as it was, for example, in that monumental work, "The Life of Jesus," by Strauss. But it can never, in any case, be finally convincing. At most, all that one can do in this way is to show how a mythical story may have arisen, and thus to make reasonable the contention that it is mythical. It is pretty easy to account for the story of the money

mythical elements in such a history to work. Myths are not necessarily a thing of slow growth. Often they spring up, as it were, in a night. The shortest possible allowance of time before the materials embodied in the Gospels took their shape in literature is more than sufficient for the mythical elaboration and coloring to have been effected.

in the fish's mouth as arising in the fact of Jesus' directing his disciples to sell a fish, and so obtain the money; or for that of his walking on the sea as a mistake for his walking by the sea. But such explanations become uncertain as they become intricate, and we are not to hazard a clear conviction that the mythical tendency is a real one, upon our success in showing how it may have worked in particular instances. At such a distance, to explain how a certain mythical narrative grew up corresponds in form very closely to the impossible logical task of proving a universal negative.*

We may detect myth in a thousand cases where we cannot possibly explain its particular mode of growth.

I do not propose, then, to attempt to show in detail how the story of Jesus' resurrection grew up. One who rejects it as mythical is by no means bound so to do. To justify the reasonableness of its rejection as authentic history, it is sufficient to detect beyond question in the New Testament the presence of an extensive mythi-

*See Lecky's "History of European Morals," Vol. I., p. 373; Carpenter's "First Three Gospels," pp. 152, 207.

cal element, from which come the narratives of Jesus' miraculous birth, with its attendant angels and their celestial songs, of his various miracles, and of his resurrection and ascension, and to refer each and all of these stories to the one common source.

Yet it is quite obvious to any thoughtful student of the times, and of the circumstances of the immediate followers of Jesus, what general causes pressed urgently upon them, and favored the belief, which became so intense and effective among them, that he had risen from the dead. Not difficult for men of that generation to accept and credit, it was, on the other hand, absolutely essential for them to have the support and comfort of such a belief. They would have been utterly desolate and hopeless without it. In this sense, the continuance of the movement depended on it, and stood or fell with it.

The disciples of Jesus had become fully possessed by the conviction that he realized the Messianic hope of the Jews. While Jesus, if he accepted it for himself, highly spiritualized the Messiah idea, his followers to the very last, as

the Gospels plainly exhibit, thought of it in the conventional, mundane sense common to their nation's imagination. It was to be the glorified but earthly reign of the Messiah over his redeemed people.

The arrest and crucifixion of Jesus suddenly blasted this hope, as applied to him, and filled his disciples with consternation. The whole structure of their selfish anticipations was thrown down. Personally, his nearer followers were left most forlorn; alone, without their leader, in a strange city, and in danger from the Jewish hierarchy and the Roman government on the one side and from the populace upon the other.*

But, with a little time for the restoration of their composure amid familiar scenes, their hope, which had been for the moment pros-

*Up to Jesus' death, it should be remembered, his avowed disciples, especially the twelve apostles, were almost all Galileans. They had accompanied him to Jerusalem on his last journey, full of hope in his manifestation of himself as the Messiah; and, when the tragical result occurred, they were far from their homes, and, indeed, like sheep without a shepherd. It is not at all wonderful that they were for the moment astounded and dismayed, and forsook him and fled. The traditions intimate pretty clearly that after his death they did what was most natural,—hurried back to Galilee.

trated, would begin to revive. In the actual immortality of the souls of men, Jews of that period were widely accustomed to believe. At least, they were all familiar with the idea. The large and influential Pharisaic party cherished it ardently, although the other great sect, the Sadducees, denied it. The first reassuring thought of the disciples, doubtless, was that Jesus, though dead, was not dead, but still in being; that he was in paradise, and that thus, though in ways different from their former expectations, his Messiahship might still be realized and vindicated.

If he was still in being, the idea that he should manifest himself to some of his followers would have presented no difficulty to men at that time. The spiritual element in men has always, to the ordinary mind, seemed to consist of matter in a state of extreme tenuity, and therefore capable, under some conditions, of becoming tangible to sense.

A very slight cause among persons of that day, and in the circumstances of Jesus' disciples, would have set in motion the belief that he had manifested himself to some of them; and

once started, such a belief would have spread like wildfire.

It is exactly thus, in response to deep necessities of the heart, that myths arise and propagate themselves.

If, for example, it was the fact that, on visiting his tomb a day or two after his interment, the sepulchre was found empty; if Jesus' body had been removed by its custodians, for which there might be many good reasons; if it could not at once be discovered, and its absence was not explained; the inference might readily, and very likely immediately, have been drawn that their Master had arisen from the dead.

If, as the tradition in all its actual forms describes, the first visitors to the tomb were women, their more excitable and imaginative natures might easily have been impressed, by some half-seen object or slightly peculiar experience, with the notion that they had met angels or other heavenly messengers.

That the body of Jesus disappeared seems the only essential condition of the legend having birth; and to its disappearance the tradition points quite definitely. Matthew tells us that

the Jews declared it to have been removed by some of the disciples, — a very credible statement, though rejected by the evangelist. It is the ingenious hypothesis of some that Joseph of Arimathea, who had allowed it to be laid in his new tomb, removed it, lest its presence there should lead to some commotion and embroil him with the Jews.

It seems probable, at any rate, that its disappearance was, in the excited state of mind of the disciples, the original source of the belief in Jesus' resurrection. This cause may have operated at once, and the idea of his return to life may have been generated in those two or three days. It is, perhaps, more probable that it did not spread so suddenly.*

In the Second Gospel we have the simplest — probably, therefore, the most primitive — account of the event after Jesus' death. That Gospel properly terminates at the middle of the last chapter, as is indicated in the Revised Version. Here, in this earliest form of the story, there is properly nothing supernatural at all. How such a tale grows is interestingly seen on

*See Martineau's "Seat of Authority in Religion," p. 372.

comparing this primitive form of it with the elaborated accounts in Matthew and Luke, and still more, with the later one of the Fourth Gospel.

At the moment, it might very well be that the disappearance of Jesus' remains should set in train a hundred wondering doubts and hopes and theories. That the agitated women at the tomb saw something strange, saw somebody in white, saw Jesus himself,—steps like these would readily be taken by a body of persons otherwise crushed in their dearest hope, and not in the least fortified by science and mature intelligence against miraculous beliefs.

In fact, what is especially noteworthy about the stories of the resurrection is (as I have remarked about the miracle stories of the Gospels generally) that they are not more abundant and elaborate than they are.* In the authentic portion of Mark, Jesus' resurrection is affirmed, but no reappearance is described. And even the appendix (doubtless a wholly genuine relic of the early Christian literature) adds only the briefest statement, not description, of three ap-

*This, to my mind, points to a later rather than an immediate period for their origin.

pearances, of which the latter, at least, is almost incredible, if only from the light in which Jesus is placed by it and the disregard by the eleven apostles of his solemn injunction.

In such vague and general assertions of a fact did this afterward confident and wide-spread belief arise.

Matthew's narrative is actually but little more elaborate or more definite. It is stated that an angel appeared to the women, that Jesus himself appeared and briefly spoke to them, that afterwards he met the eleven in Galilee, though some doubted that it was he; and this is all.

In the Third Gospel, which was written, probably, after the lapse of nearly, or quite, three-quarters of a century after Jesus' death, the account is somewhat further amplified, and its details are a little more definite in form.

But it is not until we come to the Fourth Gospel (which was written, as I have said, under the full prepossession of, and with the avowed purpose to exhibit, the Sonship to God of Jesus, and probably not before A.D. 140) that we have a collection of highly elaborated

narratives of the intercourse of the risen Master with his disciples.

I have no hesitation, therefore, in my view of the strictly mythical origin of the story of Jesus' resurrection. An examination of the statements in regard to it made by Saint Paul, who is the only nearly contemporary witness whom we are able to identify, only confirms the opinion that it grew essentially out of the primary conviction that the Messiah could not die, that Jesus was, therefore, alive after his seeming death ; that he appeared, in some ethereal form of manifestation, to his followers. Paul had, of course, no personal knowledge of the facts of Jesus' life. He expressly states how little he cared for, or examined, the testimony of the original apostles. It is altogether doubtful if he regarded Jesus as having risen in the same body which was laid in the tomb. Paul places the appearance of Jesus to himself on the occasion of his conversion (which certainly, if real, was a visionary manifestation), fully and exactly on a plane with his appearances to the other disciples.

Certainly, whatever be true as to the event of Jesus' return to life, he never effectively re-

sumed his place among living men after the event of his death. Whatever reappearances of his person are alleged, they are all of a phantasmal character. He enters through closed doors while men are speaking of him. Men doubt about his identity. He is mistaken for a "spirit." The scenes are all dramatic and unreal. Not one of the alleged Christophanies occurred in the presence of opponents, or in public unless we so class the occasion, barely asserted, but not described, by Saint Paul, when Jesus is affirmed to have appeared to "above five hundred at once." On several occasions the incredulity of some of the witnesses is a marked feature of the occurrence.

One especial word. We must not be misled by the exceeding simplicity and naturalness and artlessness of the gospel narratives into mistaking these characteristics for the tokens of historic validity and accuracy. These qualities in the New Testament literature betray, certainly, as I have said, the truthful spirit of the writers, and their ingenuous confidence in the reality of the events which they narrate. But, as repeatedly intimated, to men of such an era miraculous

events were as likely to occur as any others; and they therefore describe them with the same naturalness and simplicity as normal ones. And when men report with truthful spirit what they themselves believe, the embellishments with which they unconsciously and instinctively round out their narratives will, usually, be as natural in form, as artless, as truthful-seeming, as the rest of their narrations.

In a word, as applied to the relations of truthful men, describing what they themselves receive as fact, verisimilitude is not a test of historical truth.*

When a man is consciously trying to deceive, his inventions almost inevitably betray him to a critical reader; but when what he tells is true

* Professor J. H. Mahaffy, the eminent student of Greek history and literature, commenting on the artlessness of the style of the Iliad and Odyssey, remarks as follows: "I am convinced that all the critics, even Grote and the skeptical Germans, have overrated the accuracy of the pictures of life given in these poems. They have been persuaded by the intense reality and the natural simplicity which have made these scenes unapproachable in their charm; and they have thought that such qualities could only coexist with a faithful and simple reproduction of the circumstances actually surrounding the poet's life. But surely this argument, irresistible up to a certain point, has been carried too far." ("Social Life in Greece," p. 11.)

to himself, nature will speak in his unconscious exaggerations as clearly and as simply as in the rest of his story. The legends of the patriarchs and prophets of the Old Testament are narrated with the same naïveté as that which appears and charms us in the narratives of Jesus' miraculous acts. In the passage* where Moses meets Jehovah, to renew the tables of the Law, the narrator (as has been remarked) describes the appearance to a mortal man of the Almighty Creator of the universe, in the same simple terms with which he tells of the man's arising in the morning.

Finally, I would refer to one particular objection very gravely urged by some to bar a doubt of the historical reality of the event of the resurrection of Jesus.

It is said, if this event was not an historical fact, then the faith of the great Christian world, at a most crucial point, rests upon a delusion.

I think that it does so rest.

Nor is there anything remarkable or exceptional in this. For it is abundantly illustrated by the facts of the history of religions that, while

* Exod. xxxiv.

the moral influence and spiritual value of any form of faith must always be largely in proportion to the reality and truth of its historical and its spiritual sources, the practical issues of faith in belief and act are powerful, not necessarily in proportion to the validity of its foundations, but to its own warmth and vividness. And in the history of religions these qualities have often been exhibited in connection with beliefs the most baseless as to fact and most illogical as to theory. The world-religion which stands next to Christianity in vitality and force, the Mohammedan, certainly rests largely upon illusions. Many of the sects of Christianity have inspired their members to labor unweariedly, to suffer with the utmost fortitude, and to die without flinching, in support of the claims of wholly visionary leaders, and for points of doctrine which to Christians of to-day seem trivial. In Mormonism we have had an instance in our own time, and at our own doors, of fanatic zeal by no means dependent on or proportioned to the authenticity or the reasonableness of the basis of a religious system.

And, if it be true that the mighty arch of

orthodox Christianity has rested with one pier upon an event which we now determine to be unhistorical, this only parallels the fact that, with the other, it rests upon pure myth in the story of Adam and Eve and the Fall of Man.

IV.

THE MYTH OF THE DEITY OF JESUS.

Text—2 Cor. v. 19. In this passage Saint Paul, carefully describing the mission to which he felt he had been called, writes as follows:—

"All things are of God, who reconciled me to himself through Christ, and gave to me the ministry of reconciliation; to wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself."

[I ask you to note that this critical summary of the relation of God and Christ, and of the aim and issue of the mission of Christ, by the chief founder of organized Christianity, contains no suggestion of the deity of Jesus, but is wholly consistent with the view of his normal humanity; while it expressly contradicts, in terms, the theory of the vicarious atonement by Christ, as it has been preached throughout Christian history, although it appears now to be slowly yielding to the true conception which Paul expresses.

God is in every holy soul of man. And He has needed never to be reconciled to men, but has forever sought, and seeks, to reconcile men to himself.

These are among the most characteristic principles of true Christianity.]

ONE of the most important observations of modern historical science is that of the extent, nature and function of the mythical element in our traditions and records of past times. There

is a difference between myths and legends, not always readily discriminated, but it is not of importance to me at this moment. It seems to be chiefly this: that such a story as we call a myth embodies in historical form some idea, some longing or aspiration of men's hearts, some fear or horror, often some great truth.

A mere story, without such a core of suggestion; a local tradition of wonder or dread; a fairy tale; a ghost story, the product of mere fancy,—we call a legend. It is the element of idea, of embodied or symbolized truth, of unconscious purpose, that raises a tale to the dignity of a myth.

Rev. Dr. Hedge defined a myth thus: "I call any story a myth which, for good reasons, is not to be taken historically, and yet is not a wilful fabrication with intent to deceive, but the natural growth of wonder or tradition, or a product of the Spirit uttering itself in narrative form."

Myths, then, are honest, even if unfounded. They may convey, and have conveyed, important truth. They may grow up in any age, even in the present, although more naturally in

periods of undeveloped intellect and of crude science.

Professor Carpenter, in his recent highly valuable essay on "The Relation of Jesus to his Age and our Own," gives an interesting account of a remarkable myth which has spread through India within half a century, and closely resembles much of the mythology which has attached itself to the person of Jesus.*

As myth is really an effort to express idea or truth in historical form, it has been natural that it should peculiarly accompany the development of religion. All religions have had their element of myth. Christianity is eminent, if not pre-eminent, among the world-religions in this respect. Orthodox Christianity, as preached about us at this present moment, is a marvellous

* Story of "The Bab," — *i.e.*, The Gate, or forerunner. He came to believe himself the "Qa'im," the promised deliverer, "he who is to arise." "Around his figure there shone such a majesty that even unbelievers bowed in lowly awe. He healed the sick, effecting cures even at a distance; he was transfigured before two of his disciples; he converted his guards; and foretold his own death" by martydom. He was put to death in 1850, "maintaining to the last a lofty and unsullied spirit." His followers are estimated at nearly a million, of all castes. See "The New History of The Bab," 1893.

mythology. Its central doctrine is in the strictest sense a pure myth, and there could be no more accurate or remarkable example of one. Around this, cluster derivative and incidental stories, also strictly mythical, — such as the miraculous birth, the miraculous acts, and the bodily resurrection and ascension of Jesus, — all accepted in Protestanism. In Roman Catholicism there are an infinite number more, from that of the immaculate conception of the Virgin to the apparition of the Madonna of Lourdes. The day of miracle has never ceased for the Catholic Church.

The central doctrine of orthodox Christianity, as I have called it, is that of the deity of Jesus. I have heretofore examined it, at length, before you,* and shall now refer only passingly to its origin and development.

This great myth is an attempt of the yearning heart of humanity to assure itself of the goodness of God and to bring Him near to its imagination. The truth which it symbolizes is that of the community of nature in God and man, His benevolence toward men, His constant pres-

* "The Strict and Normal Humanity of Jesus." Published by the A. U. A. Fourth Series, Tract 105. Also "Myth of the Resurrection of Jesus," in present volume.

ence among them. Unsatisfied, as the undeveloped spiritual nature is apt to be, with its own intuitions, impatient for clearer light, surer convictions, it turns to the intellect for assurances from without itself. It looks for God in the physical order, and if any strange event occurs there, interprets it as miracle, and sees Him peculiarly in it. It is prone to accept any suggestion which may arise in its own imaginings, or from other minds, or from outward events, of manifestations of Deity in the operations of the material universe, or in the persons and acts of remarkable men. It inclines to believe such things, because they seem to help it. They give it a comfort, a certainty, which it craves, but cannot easily attain otherwise. Observe that this comfort and certainty are intellectual, not spiritual. They are not "of faith."

Thus arose the whole pantheon of India, Egypt, Greece and Rome, — the great array of gods and goddesses, of demi-gods, fauns, dryads and the rest. Thus Jesus was lifted from the category of humanity and, as happened to many of the heroes of classical times, was identified with Deity. It was a distinct instance of what

the classics called apotheosis,— elevation to godhead. The Roman Emperors were worshipped, in all sincerity and fervor, during their lifetime. The Russian Tzar is almost equally deified and worshipped by the simple peasants of the interior of his realm to-day. So, also, are the Emperors of China and Japan. Conceive the brutishness of the rural population of the Roman Empire, or of these modern empires, and consider the sentiments which a man like Alexander or Napoleon is capable of evoking, and the possibility of men's believing in the deity of an all-potent monarch, or in such a doctrine as that of the deity of Jesus, becomes very clear.

Of course, this latter myth was not developed in a day. While its germination may be earlier traced, it took some centuries to establish it fully in the creed of the church. The first step was the differentiation of Jesus as a sort of glorified man. This was possible to the Hebrews, who, exquisitely jealous of the sole majesty of godhead, could never have taken the last step. But to the Hebrews, the idea of inspired prophets was familiar for centuries, and likewise of peculiarly commissioned servants of

Jehovah, leaders of the people, like Moses and Joshua. Later, the expectation of the Messiah became general and eager. Jesus' disciples began soon to speculate as to whether he were not the Messiah, or Christ. Some of his followers had thought him John Baptist come again, or perhaps Elijah, or Isaiah. It is possibly the case that Jesus came to think of himself, sometimes, as realizing the Messianic hope. This is not hastily to be admitted on such evidence as exists. Yet it would not have been strange, under the circumstances in which he was, although it appears, at first, hardly accordant with the greatness of his mind, or the simplicity and purity of his aims, and the spiritual elevation of his most authentic thought.

But it is not necessarily incompatible with these. Even the greatest minds have their different sides and their varying moods. At least, if Jesus ever, in thought, accepted the Messiahship, he highly spiritualized it.

Judaism could never advance much beyond this point, illustrated especially by the view which Paul entertained about Jesus,— as a glorified man, the spiritual Messiah.

Yet even in Judaism was the germ of the idea, which, much more distinct in Greek philosophy, contributed chiefly to the final exaltation of the Hebrew Teacher to personal identity with the Deity. This was that somewhat weird notion of an emanation — in theological parlance, an "hypostasis" — from the Deity, as the efficient agent of his will, which appears in the Hebrew Scriptures, though without prominence there, as the "Wisdom" of God; perhaps, sometimes, "the Word of the Lord"; which in Greek was called by a term which means "word" — (and something more — the uttered, efficient wisdom and will of God) — the Logos.

Christianity, as you know, early migrated from the land of its birth, pursued its growth in Gentile lands and became deeply permeated with Gentile influences. On pagan soil there was no obstacle to the development of such a myth as that of the deity of Jesus. And this familiar doctrine of the Logos, encountered by a faith which held up the glorified man of Saint Paul, — the idea of the Messiah of Judaism, expanded to that of the Christ of all humanity, — easily led up to the complete identification of Jesus with godhead.

To this we may add, as a contributing cause, the influence of the Roman popular religion, in which such an idea as the deity of a great man was, as I have said, most familiar and attractive.

Thus, most hastily sketched, arose this gigantic myth which still holds the mind of almost all Christendom in its grasp, which moulds the piety and inspires the worship of the most enlightened nations. I think no other world-religion affords an instance of one so elaborate, so literally held, — or so audacious.

Before I pass on, let me note a qualified form in which the myth is often presented. One of the most influential sentences in the New Testament has been that in the sixteenth verse of the third chapter of our Fourth Gospel: "God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but should inherit eternal life." This and equivalent texts are found chiefly, if not exclusively, in the Fourth Gospel and the Epistles. They represent, not the final, but a secondary stage in Christian thought, in which the elevation of Jesus above normal manhood has proceeded a good way. Not one of them was in-

tended to convey the idea of his deity. But the intermediate position they suggest — between the natural theism which Jesus taught and the bold conception of God himself appearing on earth in human form — seems easier to occupy, and is more acceptable to many minds who half reluct at the latter, or find it even less attractive than this. It seems to suggest a condescension on the part of Deity, which is accepted as a proof of his love. "He that spared not his own Son," cries Paul, "shall he not, with him, freely give us all things?" I do not now further refer to this class of texts, for I wish to consider, of the whole doctrine of the deity of Jesus, what its effect has been and is.

That the presence of Christianity in the world, even including this gigantic myth, has been of inestimable importance, who could even remotely question? That even the conception of Jesus' deity, in itself, has served most important purposes, no student of religion will question. That the success of the Athanasian party at the Council of Nicæa, in A.D. 325, was on the whole more fortunate for the world than the triumph of the Arian party would have been, is

conceded, I think generally, by Unitarian theologians of to-day. Under the conditions of thought in the fourth century, it probably saved to the world the inestimable conviction of the identity of the divine and human substance on which all effective religion rests. It kept God near to man through dark and dubious ages.

So, through later Christian history, this service of keeping God near to man, which, in its way, this doctrine has performed, has been of incalculable importance. It is this indispensable truth of the divine nearness which the myth embodies, and which makes it precious.

On the other hand, the exquisite traits of Jesus' character, attributed to Deity, have kept lovely and attractive that divine countenance which the fears of men have often made dreadful, and even repellent. Sorrowful, sinful hearts have dared to worship a God who, in his human character, loved little children, and even the flowers of the field and the birds of the air; could pity the repentant harlot, and forgive the men who smote him in his last hours. Piety and poetry have woven about this wonderful myth associations past all estimate in extent and

variety, and tender, gracious, beautiful, past all description. The world was fortunate, indeed, when the conception of godhead was inextricably associated with, and forever illustrated by, the characteristics of the holy and loving soul of Jesus.

Nor has the presentation to the piety of humble minds, of deity in the form of a holy manhood,—even with the limitations of manhood,—been merely injurious. The divine Jesus among Protestants has been, like the Virgin among Catholics, a conceivable, lovable, accessible ideal of godhead, and has thus been and is the comfort and stay of innumerable hearts, who would be desolate indeed if it were rudely torn from them, with no higher and truer conception offered in its place.

And yet, at the same time, the continued prevalence of the myth of Jesus' deity has worked profound injury which rises almost to the height of disaster. As inferior coin keeps out of circulation that which is more valuable, so each imperfect religious conception, the more it is satisfying in form, the more it is an obstacle to the perfect truth. By it aspiration is satisfied,

and seeks not to rise higher. Yet not only you and I, and the people of our day, are capable of a pure and unmythical conception of God, but if, through the whole past of Christianity, the conception of God which Jesus himself offered to the world had been that on which, unqualified, men's thoughts were bent, which preaching sedulously illustrated, which shaped and inspired prayer, I know not how much higher, purer and nobler the religious condition of men would have been, how much better their moral condition. It is the tragedy of religious history that the world should not — perhaps it could not! — accept the God of Jesus, the loving, holy Father, ever near us, audient of every unbreathed prayer of aspiring or troubled man; watchful of even a sparrow's falling; more ready to forgive than we to ask forgiveness; opening his heart and his stores at the slightest knocking of his child's hand; from whom, should his child stray, He goes out, like the shepherd over the mountain sides, to seek and to save him. I accept with thankfulness and awe the actual results of religious development; but when I contrast the representation of God and his ways which Jesus offered

with the scholastic subtleties of Christendom's elaborate creeds, I could weep tears of blood that such a conception was hindered, but by a feather's weight or a hair's breadth, in making its saving way to the hearts of men.

The evil which the great Christian myth has wrought is this: that, whereas, in its time, it served to bring God near, it still more put, and puts, him away. Under the very best conditions of the prevalent Christian faith, the infinite, ever-present, loving Father is hidden by the Son. The loving soul which addresses its prayers to Jesus as God is satisfied not to rise to the all-perfect spiritual Deity to whom he himself turned in the daily needs of his spirit and the crisis of his agitated life. The whole conception of godhead has been limited, and, in being limited, has been lowered.* I cannot speak now of

* Since the above was in type, the writer, at a large meeting, heard a prayer addressed, throughout, exclusively to Jesus. The word "God" did not occur in it, nor "Father," nor "Spirit," nor was either idea suggested. Its piety was tender and touching, but the obvious limitation of the worshipper's idea of godhead was very painful. The infinite, spiritual Father was replaced by a conception strictly and narrowly humanized. One could hardly imagine an act more trying to Jesus himself (who would not even allow himself to be called "good") than the ascription to him of such a prayer. (Mark x. 17.)

the aridity, the jejuneness, the barrenness of the scholastic theology. Thank God that it is passing away; that the simple worship of Jesus the man, with his pulsating heart of love, his "eye severe" of holy righteousness, is quietly putting it aside. The present effort of the sects, more and more pronounced, to "get back to Jesus," as the phrase is, is very hopeful. But hopeful above all because it may lead, must lead, to contemplation of his surest and highest thought: to the rising of his followers above their present humanized God, to the infinite, perfect, spiritual Father from whom we are derived, in whom we live and move and have our being; the power that sustains the universe; that makes everywhere for righteousness; that works in every human heart and life, nearer to us than we are to ourselves; our all-holy, all-sufficient, accessible, tender Friend, who loves us better than we love ourselves, and only waits to bless us.

The continued acceptance of an ideal of God not the highest, holds down all our ideals. The Sicilian brigands, before they depart on a marauding raid, fail not to visit their churches, and

invoke from their chosen saints the protection and furtherance they require. Such are those saints, as their devotees conceive them, that they do not rebuke the sacrilege nor restrain from the crime. So great Christian nations hesitate not, with no uprisings of contrite sorrow, to praise and thank God for the awful victories of their armies, the slaughter and pillage of their fellow-men,— His equal children. Again, men's ideals of godhead do not withhold them from an essential impiety. Thus, humanize too much your conception of God, and it will be possible for you to pray to Him without repentance, and to accept imaginary solace without rectification of character. Witness the popular worship of the Virgin in Roman Catholic communities,— an ideal of loveliness and succor, but not of exacting righteousness. Witness a great deal of the popular worship of Jesus in Protestant lands. The humanized deity is not enough above the worshipper to rebuke his self-interest, his worldliness, his sin. To the man-god it may be possible for the assiduous worshipper to resort, unashamed and uninspired. Before the all-holiness of the loving, almighty,

fatherly Spirit, the soul must be insensible indeed that is not abashed, and cold indeed that is not touched to love and tenderness. I have often preached, and I repeat it emphatically, that the influence of the popular theology, with its lowered ideal of God, its imperfect trust in Him, and its provision for vicarious salvation, is, perhaps, the most serious moral obstacle our portion of the human race has encountered and is suffering from.

That intermediate doctrine, of which I spoke, — of God's love, manifested to the world by his sending out his Son, — engagingly though it may be stated, really involves and betrays a deep doubt of God, which the faith of Jesus would shame away. It is often frankly affirmed, even, that the evils of life are so great and dark that one cannot trust the goodness of our Father without some such peculiar and miraculous assurance. Is this, my friends, religious faith? Or is it religious skepticism? I hold the doubt of God to be impiety; for, if he exists, He must be good, it is but one — and the highest — element of his perfection. It is strictly infidelity to let any of the facts of life, or all of them, as

we see them, abate our trust in God. Who are we,—watching, for an ephemerid's day, with minds of infantile expansion,—to sit in judgment on His world, to assess His acts, to decide that, because His ways are beyond our comprehension, He is not good, and the issues of His evolving scheme of things shall not be good? That very doctrine of the Logos, out of which the myth of the sonship, and finally of the deity of Jesus grew, was actually founded on the false and pagan notion that God, in his selfhood, is too high above and far away from the world to permit him to act in it, except through an intermediary. How different the thought of Jesus, greatest of religionists and simplest of pietists! "Ask and it shall be given you; seek and ye shall find. God numbers the very hairs of your heads! Behold the birds of heaven, that neither sow nor reap, yet our heavenly Father feedeth them; are not we much better than they? If God clothes the grain of the field, and every shrub and tree, with beauty and grace and utility, shall He not clothe us, His children? Is there a man who, when his son asks bread, will give him a stone? If ye, then, being

imperfect and sinful, yet love your children, and seek to bless them, shall not the infinite Father of us all love and bless us?"

But, certainly, it is especially of the harm which the myth of the deity of Jesus does, that it puts himself away from us. The foundation principle of spiritual religion is the conviction of likeness of nature in the worshipper and the object of his worship. The instinct of a Jesus could not fail to apprehend this fundamental religious verity, and his own consciousness, flowering from the piety of ages of Hebrew faith, felt and confirmed it. Without argumentation, he assumed and asserted the identity of the divine and human substance and nature, calling God our Father, and urging men to feel themselves his children.

Thus the divinity of manhood was the basis of his appeals, correlatively, with the fatherhood of godhead. Of this all-precious truth he was himself a noble illustration. To few, if any, of his successors in history has it been permitted to leave on the world the impression of a spirituality so pure and elevated, of a spiritual oneness with God so profound and so entire.

His own most characteristic view in religion forbids us to regard such a man as Jesus as an exception to this great primary religious principle. Nor can we afford to surrender such an example of the spiritual and moral capacities of our nature. It was the habit of early times to see, in an exceptionally great man, the features of some god. But this belittled humanity and discouraged emulation. The highest achievements of humanity were surrendered and their suggestions lost. We are not inspired to imitate that which we feel to be of nature different from ourselves. If Jesus was not only, like us all, divine in nature, but actual godhead incarnate in human form, then all the force which his example possesses as an illustration of our natural powers is sacrificed. It is a beautiful spectacle still, but it adds nothing to the already measureless perfection and beauty which the exalted soul conceives in Deity. Its peculiar force of appeal, as the attainment of normal humanity, vanishes, and we are left without the encouragement of a supreme example of human excellence.

Of course, were the deity of Jesus, in any conceivable way, demonstrated as a fact, we should

have to accept it, and derive from it the incitements we could, though deprived of one of crucial importance. But it is far from demonstrated. It rests on no proper evidence. It is plainly due to misconception; a myth, arising in an early time, maintained by the conservative force of all once-grounded faiths, and the vested interests of dogmatic and ecclesiastical systems. It is unspiritual in quality, making the oneness of a holy soul with God the formal identity of personalities. It is a result to which no free inquiry, I can but think, could bring any intelligent mind as to an historical fact.

Actually, I must add, in the habit of orthodox Christian feeling, the sense of the human greatness of Jesus — his wisdom, his force of character, his moral elevation, his spiritual insight — is deeply impaired by the prevalent belief in his deity. Being, from that point of view, only a dramatic exhibition, his career becomes unreal and phantasmal. The powerful appeal which it ought to make to the consciences of men is blunted and parried. In fact, it is but little thought of, and loses, practically, almost all its force. I speak what I know, my friends. I

think you must know this too. Jesus is worshipped as Deity; his actual example is not accepted; his most characteristic principles in religion and morals are not obeyed, or even accepted. And this is largely because of the unreality which the popular theology casts about his person and career.

Even more and worse than this is true: devout worshippers of Jesus as God — seeing in the Incarnation the high purpose of his being — frankly disparage the importance and excellence of his actual career and character. Reverent and earnest souls expressly say: "As a man, Jesus was not so exceptional; his words are not so different from those of other teachers; his acts have been paralleled by those of many another saint. It is because, in his person, he brings God near to us, because the condescension and love of God were thus peculiarly manifested in him, that we rejoice in him." So, by a most pitiful inversion of reasoning, the deepest burthen of Jesus' religious thought is made to destroy the significance of his unique example!

Herein we see exactly the evil which a myth is likely, finally, to do. It may originally sym-

bolize and, as in amber, preserve through unspiritual times, some great spiritual truth. This may be, for a time, a precious service to mankind. But while mental development proceeds, and men actually become capable of receiving the spiritual truth itself, lo! the symbol has been hardening into a dogma; what was a struggling, unconscious effort to illustrate spiritual truth has become the bold assertion of outward, historic fact.

Thus, while it may continue sincere, all mythology becomes at last, as accepted, untrue, and, in its effects, misleading. The myth of the deity of Jesus, even in that form of it which, in theology, is described as his "sonship," has both obscured the great truth which Jesus especially and beautifully taught — of the spiritual identity of the divine and human natures — and has disparaged the dignity of his actual person and career and impaired the force of his high moral appeal.

To redress this great injustice, to repair these immense losses, is a service of no common importance. Feeble as we may seem to ourselves, it providentially devolves, to the extent

of our powers, upon us who recognize it. It is an important part of our duty to the world of our time. I would not have you sectaries. I would have you do intelligent justice to the truth which must almost needs lurk in every doctrine to which the hearts of men have long clung. But I would have you understand the importance of the Unitarian protest, the full significance of the effort to which we are, as a body, addicted. It is no superficial distinction in thought, no merely negative proposition, that we stand to maintain. It is the all-important, fundamental, spiritual truth of the oneness of essential humanity and divinity, making Deity apprehensible, and humanity capable of limitless ascent and perfecting; it is the normality and simplicity of all the relations between God and man, harmonizing all the affirmations of religion with all the expanding inductions of science; it is the significance and infinite hopefulness of the human career; finally, it is the dignity of the man Jesus, the nobility, practicality and commanding exigence of his spiritual thought and ethical principles; it is the exalted loveliness of his character and career, and their

profound suggestiveness as a true and many-sided, but normal, example to all men, his brethren,— all this, my friends, is what we stand for; all this we ought to understand far better than we do. To this, if we understand and accept it, we ought to give, not mere partisan loyalty, but the devotion of our sincere hearts, the earnest impulsion of our words, and the significant illustration of our characters and lives.

V.

JESUS AS HE WAS.

THE GOSPELS, *passim*.— "Jesus of Nazareth."

A DISTINCT vindication of the simple humanity of Jesus is not a mere matter of New Testament criticism, nor of importance relatively to his own personality alone. There is no perversity, nor any disposition to deprive him of due honor, in the exhibition of the illusory character of the supernatural attributes which have been ascribed to him. Why should there be? So far as Jesus is concerned, our only aim is that which is the highest of all, — to know him as he was, and to present him as he was, that the truth in him may have its full influence among men.

But, besides this, through the circumstances of Christian history, the nature of Jesus has become a crucial philosophical and theological issue, in which our whole view of the nature of our relations to God and the spiritual world —

the nature of religion — is deeply implicated. If Jesus was what he is held to be by the vast majority of Christians, if he was aught but strictly human, if his mission in life was a commission, different in kind from that of every good man, if he had a specialized and peculiar power of knowing God and revealing truth through particular endowment to do so, then an arbitrary character is attributed to the relations of man with God. Religion is not merely the compend of those relations as they exist, absolutely, in the facts of God's nature and ours, to be discerned, as are all the facts of our nature and relations in existence, by the normal use of the faculties which God has given us. It is, as orthodoxy represents it, a scheme of conditions established arbitrarily,— that is, by the will and choice of Deity,— and therefore requiring to be made known (as orthodoxy consistently holds that it is made known) by a verbal revelation.

Such a scheme as that of the sacrificial atonement, which is the essence of religion to the orthodox Christian, cannot possibly be discovered by the normal use of human faculties, as the laws of chemistry and physics can be. It

must be set forth by some method of publication as are the laws of a human state.

The allegation of anything whatever peculiar in kind in the nature of Jesus, and his authority as a preacher of truth, involves essentially the same necessity. Religion is wholly natural, or it becomes an arbitrary and, so to speak, artificial system. It cannot be both.

It is impossible for the opening mind of this late age to continue in the acceptance of the conventional orthodox view. Controlling as it is in popular thought, it is distinctly lapsing even there. Indications multiply on every hand of the tendency of thought in this direction. Scholarship is hourly showing the instability of any support such a scheme has been thought to receive from the literature contained in the Bible. It is irreconcilable with all the truth which we attain by the methods of science. It places the knowledge of religious truth on a basis so inconsistent with all our other knowledge that it is impracticable to harmonize them and accept both.

It is the reality, the naturalness, the absoluteness of religion which are vindicated by dis-

persing the false mystery, the abnormal associations which have gathered about the person of Jesus. The conception of God as acting in ways essentially such that the reason and instincts of man cannot penetrate and understand them, erects a barrier between man and God. It is a conception of an anthropomorphic quality, derived in fact from now antiquated associations with kingship, and crude, unspiritual views of the nature of revelation. It is altogether inconsistent with the highly spiritual idea of God, and of the mode of our relations with him, which Jesus himself entertained and distinctly expressed, as the Sermon on the Mount abundantly exhibits. It is perfectly plain from that so-called discourse —(which is, you should bear in mind, a compilation of remembered fragments of his habitual preaching, and so gives us a clear general view of its character)— that Jesus' thought of God, and our relations to him, was wholly and strictly a natural one. As God has not left himself without witness in any people, but seers and very humble hearts have felt for and haply found him in every land, so this imperial soul discerned Deity in nature and

in life, as the almighty power there; as the origin of our spiritual being and the ever-present source of strength and light and truth to us. He saw Him as love, and applied to Him that most suggestive of conceptions, which Hebraism had long before developed, of Fatherhood. Read again the chapters containing those fragments of his truly wonderful preaching, and you cannot but see that his view in religion was as I characterize it,— strictly natural,— that of strictly absolute relations between God and man.

The value of his own personality and career is as normal illustrations of human nature, of its capabilities, and of the actual and possible relations between man and God. As such they are of inestimable importance to us. Ill, indeed, could we spare such an example as Jesus was of elevated, of typical humanity! No such master in any department of thought or life can be spared. How could literature spare Shakespeare, or art spare Raphael?

Yet the injury to religion, which the conception of an abnormal quality in Jesus occasions, is of almost greater importance, negatively. It

overturns the whole fabric of spiritual religion, and deprives a spiritual philosophy of human nature of an inestimable example. It has, in very great measure, defeated the actual religious work which Jesus so impressively did. An artificial conception, it makes all religion, for those who accept it, likewise artificial. It makes the religious life unreal; dissociates it from the common experience of men; diverts their thoughts from personal inquiry into the substance of religion to an unfruitful adoration of his person; takes from his elevated thought the quality of absolute truth, finding its authentication in men's own hearts, and makes his utterances the didactic expressions of a delegated authority.

It has furnished, in the acceptance of his alleged vicarious redemptorship, a delusive alternative to the high morality he exacted as the sole condition of acceptance with God. It has taken from spiritual religion that quality of adaptedness and congeniality with human nature which gives it charm and empire at once with honest souls. I deeply feel that the force of Jesus' religious thought has thus been profoundly impaired and neutralized. Received

not as the convictions of a deep, aspiring human heart, appealing to kindred hearts, but as the formal enunciation, by an authority, of truth otherwise inaccessible to men, it has made them content with a formal response, not a vital one; and has cultivated the sense that, if they keep in safe relations with himself, personally, such formal and not vital response is sufficient.

It will be no slight, but an immense, service to the cause of truth and the cause of spiritual religion, my friends, if we can restore to men the actual man Jesus, so early lost to view. I do not think that those who have hitherto cultivated the mystical idea of him have ever done justice to his actual intellectual and moral greatness. The mystical conception is in its nature unintelligible, and removes him from the usual standards of judgment and from intelligent criticism. It makes him effectively an object of sentiment, not of robust estimation and hearty sympathy. He is an enacted pattern, not an illustration of intelligible traits.

The fact appears to me clear that Jesus was a man of most rare intellectual gifts, of the greatest moral force, of singular personal weight,

and, as I need not add, of exalted spirituality. The effeminate portrait which Middle Age art handed down, and with which the mystical view seems naturally to associate itself, is utterly inadequate and misleading, and unjust to him. It is not even fairly characteristic. The delicate, feminine side he had; witness some of the most exquisite incidents of his conduct. But there was nothing of weakness or sickliness in it, and it did not more than justly balance the vigor and energy of his character. Virility is the quality which the discriminating student of Jesus finds the characteristic one. His preaching was energetic, forcible, incisive. At times it is difficult not to describe it as harsh. He had a commanding power by which his very presence awed and controlled rude men, and exacted the respect of those whose advantages had been greater and whose station in life was higher than his own. His organization was probably delicate, but his resolution and courage were unbounded. He foresaw the fatal issue of his public course; but he faced death with perfect composure, albeit the dread of its agony could rend his soul. When you consider that this "Hebrew youth,"

as Dr. Furness loved to call him, left the little city of his birth, a man of modest (but I do not believe of low) origin, with only the culture of the ordinary Jewish schools; made his way to the capital of the nation, unknown and unsupported; opposed himself in the boldest manner and the most radical spirit, not only to the corrupt and hypocritical conduct of leading men and classes, but to the very principles of religion and ethics of the people, which they held with a fervor of conservative loyalty surpassing anything we know to-day; that he won by the charm and power of his preaching the enthusiastic devotion of the masses, so that crowds thronged his steps, and the conviction spread that he was the expected Messiah, the Saviour of the nation; that he so aroused the fears of the hierarchy that his destruction seemed to them essential to their own security; — all this in a year or two; — in such an outline of his career is indication enough of a remarkable personality.

But read the remains of his preaching and the incidents of his conduct, and admiration only grows. In his tranquil religious moments his

thought and speech are full of grace and charm, a poet's love of nature, serene piety, and tenderest love of his kind. His morality was idealistic and absolute, but not rigid or ascetic. For the natural frailties of humanity he showed the most indulgent pity; for pride, cruelty, ostentation and pretence he had an overwhelming scorn. His eloquence must have been of a high order. His power of illustration has never been surpassed. What would it not have been to hear the voice that uttered the Beatitudes, or told the story of the Prodigal? Aroused to indignation, he must have been tremendous. He assailed those whom he held responsible for the evils of his time with scathing virulence of invective. "Hypocrites," "pretenders," was his favorite description of the trusted and respected religious leaders of the people. "Fools," "whited sepulchres," "blind guides," "serpents," "offspring of vipers," — these are others of his epithets for the pietists and aristocrats of Jerusalem. "They sit in Moses' seat," "therefore obey them, where you must; but imitate them not. For they say and do not. They bind heavy burthens and lay them on men's shoulders,

and they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers. All their works they do to be seen of men. They shut the kingdom of God against men, not entering themselves nor suffering others to enter. They compass sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he is made he is twofold more the child of hell than themselves."

Here, surely, is nothing effeminate, sentimental or mealy-mouthed! Would to God we had voices to speak in such tones, to-day, of the pollution of our own Church and State by the same vices and crimes!

The assaults and machinations of the hierarchy against him, open or covert, he parried with masterly cleverness, and the most acute dialectic skill. There is no point, indeed, at which his characteristic quality appears more strikingly than in his encounters with subtle minds, well-furnished, watchful for mistakes of his, and ever ready to convict him of blasphemy and treason. Particularly, in these disputes, he appears as a man of the world, astute, ready of resources, full of the knowledge of men, well informed, and familiar with the great Law of his people, their

traditions, and the intellectual and moral abuses of both which were rife among them.

I have so often referred to the parables of Jesus that I need only remind you of them as illustrations on another side of an intellectual genius which, as there seen, appears to me consummate. Unpremeditated, as they doubtless were, stricken out in the heat of didactic earnestness, these stories were simply perfect in their art and pertinence. Without doubt they are unequalled in any literature. Many of them exist for us only in the merest fragments; happily, a few remain seemingly complete. Beyond doubt they are all only examples of a far larger number, evolved for every variety of application in his current addresses to the people. Some teaching very simple lessons in morality; some, mere illustrations of practical wisdom; some, cutting satires of the vices of the leading classes and the aberrations of the nation from its ideals; some, exquisite pictures of philanthropy; some rising, with the greatest simplicity of form, but with profound insight, to picture the character of God and the workings of the spiritual nature of man.

Possibly one or two convey views or lessons which we could not, without qualifications, approve; but the exceptions are very few; as a body, they are full of purest truth and beauty, and in form every one is a gem. Consider how one or two ingenious tales, one or two poems, have made their authors immortal; how, even of late, a short series of pathetic little stories have lifted into the widest popularity that pleasant writer who has just left our shores for his Scottish home; compare any of the labored efforts of the same kind with the tales of Jesus, and you will appreciate in him an artistic genius of the highest order, which only the notion of a superhuman quality in him could have obscured to the world.

The whole quality of Jesus' habitual preaching, as of his personal demeanor, was of the same incomparable power, delicacy and suggestiveness. He who should come across the substance of a few chapters of Matthew and Luke in some literature before unfamiliar would certainly be amazed, not only at the moral elevation and spiritual insight, but at the intellectual genius to which these mere remnants

of a great man's words — pitiably few and imperfect, yet not insufficient — bear witness. If men traced Hercules by his footsteps, what was he who left these ineffaceable imprints on the literature of the world?

Of these relics, I again urge, as of all the rest of what we know of Jesus, the notion of his superhumanity, of a nature different in kind from that of other men, impairs profoundly, not only the suggestiveness and inspiration, but the highest moral effect and the most delicate charm. Deity might have declared the whole moral law and revealed all the truths of the spiritual order. An archangel might speak them, perhaps (if such beings exist). Such proclamation could only be of form, and must lack edifying power until, through experience and contemplation, the hearts of men, normally working, should enter into the truth so published. What inspires men is the attainments, the aspirations, the yearnings of fellow-men; and the only healthy relation of any mind to any other is that of perfect independence and freedom, subject only to the influence which flows, naturally, from truth of thought and truth of character.

Even a highly-strained discipleship, my friends, is not a healthy attitude of mind. Not masterhood but fellowship is the true relation of the preacher to the hearer, — lest the listening mind should be overborne by an *ipse dixit*, and be influenced by something else than truth. When a man or woman becomes a devotee of some great mind, the influence of that mind ceases, so far, to be quickening and invigorating. Witness many an instance of the enamored followers of great poets and philosophers in ancient or modern days. Abjectness, even in piety toward God, is not an ennobling or fruitful posture of the soul, and it is not encouraged by the example of Jesus. To noble human leaders in thought, an adulatory following is always repulsive. "I hate," said Mr. Emerson, "where I looked for a manly furtherance, to find only a mush of concession." Something in the same spirit, Jesus impatiently exclaimed, "Why call ye me Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?"

Even to lapse into facile exaggeration in our estimate of such a man as he is unjust to him and unwholesome for ourselves. It discourages

a diligent, intelligent scrutiny of his traits and thoughts, impairs fellowship with him, and hides him more effectually than even perverse disparagement might do. What we want is to know and understand the real man as he was. What he wants is to be known and understood as he was. We are not held, in the least, save as judgment and conscience require, to agree with him at every point, to approve each incident of conduct or justify every expression. We are far removed from Jesus; the records are scanty; he is entitled to all the reserve in judgment which we should vindicate to other men. Sufficient that we detect beyond question, in him, the highest nobility of spirit; dignity of aim and of conduct; perfect purity of mind; disinterested ardor for the right and for human welfare; for the clearer knowledge and for the love and honor of the Divine Being, and for the prevalence of His perfect thought for the world (which we call His "will") in human life. These constitute the ground of our admiring confidence, love, and gratitude; these, illustrated in a gracious life, and by the exquisite, convincing appeals of his lips. Dissent Jesus

would have freely tolerated and respected; there is no trace in him of the dogmatist. Pretence and hypocrisy, the vices of the professional religionist, were what excited his contempt and scorn. I would not be at pains to find points at which one might disapprove him; it is enough to see that he was human, and that the whole sweep of his life was noble, self-forgetful, aspiring, full of moral ardor, full of love. Perfect I no more declare him than many another of God's saints; it is not possible for us fallible mortals so to assess and judge each other. He gently but energetically reproved a mere kindly suggestion of his established completeness in moral excellence. "None is good," he said, "but God."

There is no final goal in human character. Beautiful, Jesus was; strong, brave, generous, loyal, tender, gentle, self-sacrificing; practical and idealistic at once; a true, large, healthy, holy man, of endowments which place him easily in the front rank of the world's great leaders. He preached, in most convincing and engaging terms, the absolute religion of theism and a perfect ethics; and, if ever a man did, he lived

what he thought and preached. Without ecstasy, but with profound intuition and clear realization of spiritual facts, he passed his life in an open oneness of spirit with the Divine Spirit, which was the crowning attainment of his inner life.

Do you still insist, was he not unique? Yes, unique, as every greatest man is unique. But there is nothing to show that he was in kind, in nature, exceptional. He only illustrated in himself the very truths which he asserted of all humanity, and to which he called every man to live loyally. "Ye are the children of God; His spirit is in you; be perfect as God is perfect; ask, and His spiritual furtherance will help you to all attainments." This was the sum of his religion and his ethics.

To set aside, by a rudimentary metaphysics, such a man from the rank of our humanity has been fatuity indeed! The circumstances in which that disposition arose in the history of Christianity are plainly traceable. The growth of an illusory interpretation of Jesus' nature and position can be clearly accounted for, and the inquiry leaves it no validity in philosophy or

in fact. For us of to-day, my friends, remains the important service to Jesus, and to our time, to release the minds of whom we can from its continuing influence and to restore him to the intelligent comprehension and just appreciation of our fellows.

Under the circumstances of our period, we can do, in fact, no more important service. And, happily, the times are ripening fast to make it feasible. The tendency of present thought is manifested clearly in the diminution of dogmatic zeal and the yearning towards Jesus as a practical leader in the moral and religious life. The latest informal creed * offered to the orthodox world, and which bids fair to spread widely there, it would seem, omits all metaphysical affirmations, and declares only for "the words of Jesus" and for practical righteousness. On exactly this basis our own body has lately placed itself. Let us, in heartiest sympathy with all faithful aspiration and effort in religion, seek to promote this turning to practical religious truth; and by clearness in our thought, above all, through the

* I refer to the so-called "Life Creed" of Rev. Dr. Watson, "Ian Maclaren."

elevation of our thought and life towards the plane on which his own visibly moved, exert ourselves to make the real Jesus known, honored, loved and imitated.

VI.

INSPIRATION.

THE radical truth, out of which the present discussion must grow, is that of the essential identity of the divine and human natures. This is a postulate of religion. Unless it be true, we can never know God, much less enter into intelligent relations with him. In the expansion of his traits, Deity infinitely transcends humanity and rises above human comprehension; but, if the traits of his nature are not (so far as ours extend) essentially the same with man's, then we cannot even apprehend them or imagine them. If he has traits other and essentially unlike ours, these we cannot even guess at. Our inferences from nature, as well as the accepted intuitions of faith and the instinct of worship, all presuppose this general truth,—the essential likeness of Deity and humanity.

So we believe of God, in general terms, that he is a vital being; a being possessed of powers

and forces; a rational being; a moral being; a being capable of emotions and affections. We predicate of him, necessarily, force (or will), mind, emotion, moral qualities. Take away any of these attributes, and he ceases to be God in any sense satisfactory to religion. To apply the divine name to the physical forces of nature, or to a mere idea, or to a generalization like "humanity," is to utter a misnomer, to abuse language. At least, the present inquiry is precluded on any other condition than that I have named.

But if God exists, and is such as we assume, another truth immediately presents itself. It is this: God must express or manifest himself. His traits or attributes are such as logically compel this. Vitality, will, mind, affections, morality, cannot remain inoperative and inexpressive. Vitality implies functional activity and procreative ability. Will implies its exertion. The activities lodged in an entity possessed of force are spontaneous. Mind implies activity; a thinking being not only can think, he does think. So the affectional and moral natures imply self-expression. A good and loving God must desire

to procreate a spiritual family and to enjoy the delight of blessing them and of winning their love.

Now, there are two grand ways in which such a being may express himself. The one is through the outward world, the world of sense; the other is in the inward world, the world of spiritual relations. Possessed of force, he may operate effects in the material universe; as spirit, he may directly reach the kindred spirits of his offspring. So we have two parallel fundamental and instinctive beliefs of religion: first, that God has called into being, sustains and governs the outward universe, through which course the "forces of nature" (as we call them, but which are really only the diversified manifestations of the divine personal will); and, second, that Deity is, and has always been, in direct personal relations with men. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." "There is a spirit in man, and the inspiration of the Almighty giveth them understanding." The modes and extent of this personal relation of God with men have always been debated; they can never be exhaustively de-

scribed or known, since the finite intellect can never comprehend the Infinite. But the substance of them has been implied in all religious belief and sentiment. And this is what we mean by inspiration.

In-spiration, the in-coming of God's spirit to man's. But God's spirit is himself, and man's spirit is himself. Inspiration, then, is only the approach, the direct, personal approach, of God to man. It corresponds, obviously, to prayer, which is the uprising, the approach of our spirits to God. The two are the two elements of communion between God and man, each correlative with the other, as Jesus implied when he said that, in answer to prayer, God would not fail to give men his Holy Spirit. If, in the secret of one's closet, or in public "in the great congregation," one has really risen, in the essence of his being, a little toward God; if one's spirit has been actually lifted into contact with the Divine Spirit, one has prayed. Life may be a prayer if one lives habitually in this contact, as some have done. The corresponding relation of God to us, his answering approach to and communion with us, is inspiration. August, profound, high, the

thought is; but in essence it is simple. Obviously, upon our assumption of the essential likeness of Deity and humanity (which Jesus, greatest of religious philosophers, postulated in his doctrine of God's paternity and human childship to God), the case is strictly parallel in its nature with that of genuine communion between the spirits of men.

And by reference to such communion of human spirits we actually best illustrate the various problems connected with inspiration. For example, as to the substance of inspiration, who has not received its counterpart from a human friend? In all the common intercourse of life, it is a scarcely noticed, but pervading and most effective influence. Every man is, at any moment, not only what he is in himself, but what he becomes under the impression of the spiritual natures with which he is more or less closely in contact. From every one of us there go out, constantly and irrepressibly, spiritual influences corresponding to his character, affecting whomsoever they may reach. It is often said of a physician that his presence is worth more than his prescriptions. In warfare, the contagion of

a courageous character stimulates all others and helps them to be heroic. You are led into the company of some good man. The conversation may be wholly neutral in its character. You may discuss not one of the higher problems of life, nor receive from him a syllable of actual homily; but you come away refreshed in all your better nature, your mind newly aroused and oriented, the all of you ready for new effort and endurance. Of such experiences we often use, and rightly use, the word "inspiration." Sometimes we call it "magnetism." The essential fact is that one's spirit has come into communion or contact with others; and the influences proceeding from those others, their "drawing nigh," or "incoming" have given stimulus and revival to one's own. These spiritual or personal influences correspond to those of the material world. They radiate spontaneously, as heat from the fire or light from the sun. One cannot be in the presence of another without, in some measure, giving them forth and receiving them.

So of God. The Infinite Spirit cannot be in the universe without these influences going forth from Him. We live, everywhere and momenta-

rily, under them. And all the energies of His infinite nature are perpetually in complete activity. He is at all times all that can be, both in Himself and to every one of His children and His creatures. So the influences proceeding from Him are constant and all-abundant. His presence is like that of the all-pervading air, whose pressure, indeed, we do not know that we feel; but shut one's self off from it on any side, and how tremendous! Withdraw it, pollute it, and we perish. Open but the door or window, and how it streams in to revive one! We cannot get figures from the natural world too tremendous for the analogies of the spiritual. But the subtileness and gentleness of the divine forces, in either realm, are equal to their potency. A prominent mining engineer told me that he had lately stood in the engine-room of some great iron-works at a time when, from the large apartment, the blowing engines were removing every hour an amount of air more than ten times the capacity of the room. All this air was being forced in by the pressure of the external atmosphere through the accidental crevices about doors and windows. But so gently was this vast

operation going on that, when he opened the door to enter, he had felt a waft of warm air come strongly out, like a summer breeze, upon his face. So tremendous, no doubt, so irresistible, and yet so gentle and unperceived, is also the descent of the infinite spirit of God upon human souls.

To proceed, the human analogy which we were following will indicate also the conditions of the divine incoming. Thus how often we are in each other's bodily presence, exchanging courtesies, seeing and hearing each other, and yet conscious that our real selves are infinitely wide apart! Sometimes this takes place. You are drawn to some other, and begin to open yourself to him, as we say, happily going out to him, when something in his manner or speech or tendency of thought suddenly arouses a suspicion or antagonism. Instantaneously a change comes over your feelings; you are conscious of a barrier erecting itself within you; you draw back in the spirit, while yet your lips move freely and politely, and the conversation goes on in form as before. There is no longer communion. The other may draw near to you still, but you have withdrawn from him.

Or, again, you are in the company of some great and good man; but you are low, unspiritual, unready to be influenced by him, or you are, only for that moment, perverse, unsympathetic; you are conscious with a sense as of guilt, perhaps, that you are shutting him out.

Here, then, we have the indication of the primary condition of inspiration; that is, receptivity. Though another spirit may approach one's own, to come in it must be admitted, or there is no inspiration. As in prayer, though God be never so accessible, the human spirit must rise, or there is no prayer. In a word, it is a natural and necessary law of inspiration that God can come into us, can inspire us, only on condition that, and so far as, we are able and ready to admit Him. As David said, "The Lord is nigh to all who call upon Him, to all who call upon Him in truth." And Saint James said, "Draw nigh to Him, and He will draw nigh to you." And as Jesus said, "God is Spirit; and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth."

One of the most terribly impressive suggestions of Jesus, which has given rise to no end of super-

stition, is a wholly philosophical statement, and vividly illustrates this law of receptivity regulating inspiration. "All manner of sin and blasphemy will be forgiven unto men; but the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven, . . . neither in this world nor in the world to come." This is merely the statement of a natural and necessary truth. To blaspheme against the Holy Spirit is not to utter mere ribald words of profane import. It is to outrage the Spirit by refusing it admission. It is to turn away God from the heart's doors with contumelious rejection of his loving, saving approach. To be accepted is all God really asks from his children. Their childish, ignorant, perverse denials and aspersions of his majesty, with all other wickedness, he can forgive, for his accepted presence will purge all away; but he cannot bless with forgiveness the soul which persists in an attitude of hostile alienation, for he cannot reach it with his healing, reconciling influences, whether in this world or another.

But not only is inspiration conditioned thus by the general attitude of our minds; it is conditioned also in particular by our individual men-

tal constitutions. Character consists in the susceptibility of the individual to the divine elements or forms of truth, the adaptation of his spiritual structure to apprehend and use them. The presence of God with us is a grand energizing force, urging and stimulating all our faculties. But it is obvious that its effects will be chiefly manifested in those which are most highly developed, most susceptible to stimulation. To state it in another form, as God is all truth, his presence with us is the presence of all truth; and the individual mind responds to those elements of truth which it is best able to understand and appreciate and desire. We see one man constitutionally susceptible to the truth of beauty; he is an artist; but he may be in equal degree deficient in susceptibility to moral truth. He may be at once an artist and a criminal. We see another highly sensitive to the truths of human relations; he is a philanthropist, but he is utterly untouched by the truths of form, color, or sound. So the influence of God's presence with these contrasted organisms, pressing equally upon all, will exhibit itself most fully in those particulars of their character which are most susceptible.

And thus we shall have our Isaiahs and Davids, our Homers and Shakespeares, our Raphaels and Mozarts, our Anselms and Howards and Channings.

Nor is only this true. We not only vary as individuals among others, but each one may vary within himself as to his capacity for receiving inspiration. Are there not hours when each of us is, somehow, peculiarly plastic to various forms of truth; hours when one is more than usually susceptible to beauty, to love, to moral duty; hours, most blest of all, when (perhaps through vicissitude of earthly condition) one is strangely responsive to the whole incoming of the Divine, and able, as not usually, to rise into his felt presence? These are "God's opportunities," when his spirit flows into ours newly and more abundantly, as the reviving air of morning presses in at our opened windows, after nights perhaps of peaceful, composing slumber, perhaps of weary grief or of wasting pain.

I have thus far (imperfectly, according to the measure of this brief essay) tried to exhibit the nature of inspiration and its practical conditions. My principal aim has been to show it to be a

universal and generic, not a particular and individual relation of the Divine to human spirits; mysterious, indeed, but not miraculous; constant, not occasional; normal, not irregular or capricious. It remains only to inquire after its results.

We have seen that spirits approach each other, reach each other, commune, on condition, and to the extent of, and according to their natural and acquired adaptation of structure, or, in common words, according to their fitness for sympathy. But it is a truism that what we sympathize with we understand. The sympathy is possible because of mutual likeness; and that which is like ourselves we understand, because in ourselves and our own consciousness we have its counterpart. To the extent, therefore, of our own knowledge of ourselves, of our spiritual quickening and exaltation,—that is, according to our capacity to receive him,—when God comes to us, we know him. In a word, to the extent to which we receive inspiration, we have also revelation. The God who comes into us is unveiled to us. We see him no longer in a glass darkly, groping after him, if haply we may find him

among outward phenomena or by the indirect processes of reasoning, but face to face.

Revelation, then, is also a natural and necessary fact, the concomitant and result of inspiration. But this does not mean revelation in the common meaning of the term, but in a deeper and truer sense. As in common usage, inspiration has meant not God's quickening presence, open to and pressing upon all souls, but an especial influence arbitrarily exerted upon select individuals, so revelation has meant, not the direct spiritual knowledge of God, the apprehension by sympathy of his nature and character and relations to us, but practical information, the verbal communication of outward facts of his past dealings with men, of his present providential plans and future purposes. But, without now discussing the alleged proofs of any such supposed communications from God to men, it is sufficient to point out that they could never, if verified, convey to men true knowledge of God. Information reaches only to the mind, the intellectual part of man. It could convey only knowledge about God, not the knowledge of God. We might have of it all that has ever been pre-

tended, and still men might not know him. The very dead might rise, as Jesus said,—

> "Angels descend with songs again,
> And earth repeat the loud Amen,"—

and still they might not know him. "Who by searching hath found out God?" It is only when the spirit which is in man, the all of us, is brought into that true relation of sympathy with him that we are in actual contact with the object of knowledge, so that it becomes possible for us to apprehend and understand what it is. Only then, when we are at one with God, do we know him even as we are known of him. Only when the man is inspired is God unveiled.

But let us note, finally, what this revelation and true knowledge of God must in the ultimate instance result in. In essence and in extent, we have seen, inspiration and revelation depend upon the likeness of the human spirit to the Divine. So far as this extends, so far does the man know God, and so far he reflects God. The lover of beauty knows God in æsthetic relations, and is God-like in his love of and skill in plastic art. The nobly moral man may reflect the divine righteousness. The man of mighty

will may image the infinite energy of God. The philanthropist may be divine in his love of his brethren. But suppose all these things in one. It is plain that the soul which should surrender itself totally to the divine incoming must become (to its own extent) completely like God, understanding and responding to him in all parts of his nature, revering him in all his traits, willing all, and willing only, the things he wills. To the full extent of its own capacity the human spirit will have taken in the Divine Spirit; and all its springs of feeling, of thought, and of action will be filled and energized and governed by the indwelling God. In the man we see the "fulness of the Godhead," the plenitude of present Deity, enshrined. Then (if I may here borrow a former statement of my own), "when the two wills thus united coincide in the direction of their operation, when the all of the manhood surrenders itself in sympathy to co-operative Deity, when the man loves as God loves, purposes as God purposes, wills as God wills, then, freely and of himself, yet under the single direction of divine impulse, the man acts by, for, and as God. Though the human soul re-

mains individual and the human will free, the action of the man is also the action of God. The two are one, not in person, but in efficiency and in semblance. The man is man. God is still God alone; but the Divine Spirit has taken up its abode in the human economy, the human faculties are energized and directed by the divine co-operative will, the Divine Spirit is normally incarnate with the human, its spring of power, its guide, its vital force."

Incarnation, then, is the ultimate result of inspiration. Where the Divine Spirit enters by inspiration, there it dwells by incarnation.

Is not this the phenomenon presented to us in the career of Jesus? In him the confident apprehension and unreserved acceptance of the Divine Spirit took to his consciousness the character of a complete union. "I and my Father are one." The Christian world has felt the reality in him of this august fact, and has confused his personality with that of Deity. The fact was not this, nor that the all of Godhead was in him; but that (in the manner I have tried to suggest) the whole capacity of that transcendent manhood opened itself to the in-

coming Spirit of the Divine. If, as parent and offspring, a common nature is in the two, the product of this total inspiration must be the ideal man. And also it must be the image of God.

VII.

THE FEASIBILITY OF SINLESSNESS.

"Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect." — MATT. v. 48.

I SUPPOSE the great difficulty which many, who are unable to believe that the Head of Christendom belonged to any category of being other than that of human nature, find in admitting that then he could have been sinless, and, on the other hand, which the great majority of Christians who believe him to have been sinless find in admitting that then he could have been a man, arises from the same source, — namely, the intimate association in every mind of the fact of sinfulness with the character of humanity.

The one party being unable to admit a supernatural theory of his nature, and therefore believing Jesus to have been strictly a man, argue that, being a man, he could not have escaped sin. The others, having imbibed a faith

in his perfection of character and life, argue (on precisely the same ground) that therefore he could not have been merely a man.

And either course of reasoning brings up, therefore, the same question,— namely, is sin an essential in the character of human nature? That is, is it contrary to the nature of humanity, and therefore impossible to be conceived, that a man should live and escape sin? Or is sin only a thing to which man is liable? That is, is it not merely an incident of human experience?

The almost universality of the fact we all admit. Solomon's confession expresses our general conviction, "There is no man that sinneth not." Ec 7²⁰

But observe clearly this point. It is not the facts of human history to which, logically, we appeal to decide the question, but the traits of human nature. This point is, not what men have been, but what men may be. From history and observation we get ideas of the absolute characteristics of manhood, and it is from the nature of these traits that we must infer the possibility of their assuming any supposed relation to each other or to a fixed standard.

We need, at starting, further to discriminate what sin is. There is often much confusion in our minds about it.

Observe, then, first, that sin is a voluntary state; that is to say, a state of the mind over which we have a potential or conceivable control. Whatever is beyond our power is beyond our responsibility, and does not affect our moral character. Hence, if there were such thing as "original" sin, we might affirm paradoxically that then it were not sin. If God has given us a twist towards evil, then in proportion as we are so inclined we are not sinful. It is no shame to a bat that he cannot see in the daytime. Natural bad traits certainly lower their possessor in the scale of being; but they do not imply in him that hostile and alienated state of the dispositions in which sin consists. Cannibalism could hardly subsist in a high state of civilization, yet it might be practised in entire innocence from sin.

On the other hand, when we are speaking accurately, sin is to be distinguished from guilt. Sin is, properly, not a characteristic of our actions, but a state of our minds. It is not in

what we do, it is what we feel. Even in our thoughts there is a nice distinction between guiltiness and sinfulness. It is guilty to imagine wicked deeds: as Jesus says of adulterous thoughts, that they contain the same moral elements as the acts in which they would issue. But sinfulness is that general state of the mind which permits guilty thoughts to arise. It is that moral torpor and perversity which most of us feel; that indescribable repugnance to our own ideals; that indifference to holiness and unwillingness to combat temptations which go along with us, making our conduct erratic and unworthy, and casting a chill and shadow over our lives. Of course, it includes indifference to progress; that is, a willingness not to receive higher light which on any hand might be enjoyed.

Now, then, our question is, is such a state of soul essential in the character of manhood? Would he cease to be a man who should escape it? Would he be, necessarily, other than man who should be born free from it?

Or is it only incidental to our moral career? That is, is it merely a state of soul which the

character or theory of our career renders it highly probable should exist, often or generally, at certain stages of that career?

To determine this, it is plain that we must examine also what we are. What is man? The idea which is, and has always been, more or less clearly entertained among men is that man is a developing spirit. Jesus very clearly indicates this as his view. It corresponds with our native instincts.

At least, all would admit that man is an imperfect spiritual being. The Calvinistic picture (as found still standing in the popular creeds, though tacitly rejected by the popular faith) makes man a demon, wholly inclined to evil, incapable of good; nay, even his good, bad; so that his very longings and prayers for holiness are an offence to God. But everybody knows better than this. We know that men are indifferent, sluggish, perverse, easily led away, careless of spiritual growth, some of them downright bad; but we know what good there is in them is good, and nothing other.

And so I say we regard man as imperfect; that is, as not having attained his ideals. This is

what we deduce from the history of mankind, and from their present condition. Not a fact can be brought forward which properly indicates that diabolism of soul which the crude and disheartening — the almost wicked — theory of "total depravity" implies. Indeed, I think I am prepared to maintain that there are no facts to show anything essentially evil in man; I mean any disposition to love evil because it is evil. It is Satan only who could be imagined saying, in Milton's words, "Evil be thou my good!" Eve and Adam yielded to temptation; they did not manifest a positive preference of the bad, as such. To men all, the moment of yielding to temptation is commonly a moment either of delusion or else of overmastering passion.

This is not to say that individuals have not become diabolic in their wickedness, — perhaps they have. Such depravation of the moral nature is perhaps conceivable, and must perhaps be admitted as possible to free moral agents. I only claim that what we know of our race, generically, shows that man is characteristically a moral being in a stage of imperfect development.

Now, then, what principle of culture is appro-

priate to the development of the moral nature? In other words, how can a spiritual being be developed? I might say, how can any faculty or function, physical or spiritual, moral or practical, be developed?

We find by observation and by reasoning that there is only one way, and that is by use, by practice and exercise of the function or faculty. This stands to reason and is observed in fact.

But see what this implies. In the case of the moral nature it implies temptation. That is to say, that, since the morality of conduct depends on choice, the exercise of the moral nature consists in choice. Mark this clearly: the exercise of the moral nature consists in choice. But choice demands the opportunity of choosing. Hence, for the purposes of our moral education, we need both such objects of desire as serve to demand of us a genuine choice, and even such appetites and passions in ourselves as give to that side of the question a real hearing; that is, such as make the choice a real one.

In other words, we need to be tempted, not merely in form, but in genuine fact. We need to be solicited to evil, on the one hand, as well

as to be impelled to good, on the other. The seductions of the flesh and of the world; the appetite for riches, for position, for display, for fame,— all the passions,— need to have a real force, so as to test severely the contrary principles of spiritual aspiration, moral rectitude and unselfish benevolence.

In other words still, a spiritual being, possessing inherent moral faculty, cannot be conceived except as liable to be tempted. For he could hardly know the excellence of virtue unless it were sometimes contrasted in his own soul with evil; and he could never really exercise his moral faculties unless he had occasions of testing them against real opposition. Therefore, liability to temptation is an essential fact in our spiritual history.

But, observe, liability to be tempted is not the same thing as liability to fall. To be tempted is one thing, to yield is another; and, when we have discerned that human nature must inevitably be solicited to evil, we have still not discerned that it must inevitably fall. Then we may admit temptation to be an essential of our experience, but not necessarily admit sin to be an essential of our character.

For what is it in temptation which subserves the purposes of moral development? Simply this, is it not the bringing us face to face with evil and causing us to put forth our strength to resist it? We need a real contest with evil; we need to turn its solicitations over and over in our minds, so that our choice of the good shall be a real, deep and heroic victory.

But, mark me, we do not need to fall. I know that even guilt often becomes to us the instrument of illumination, and our sin, when we have risen from it, the basis of virtue. And yet I see nothing in our nature which goes to show that, in any case, it would be better for us that we should have yielded to, rather than have resisted, temptation. Sin may, when overcome through repentance, be made the means of grace to us, thank God. But if, at the moment when we were tested in temptation, we had manfully resisted it, we should already then have been where guilt and repentance, two long steps, have had to bring us. The yielding is always a negative means of grace, at best. It simply removes the illusion of temptation. It makes us see the hatefulness of sin, but it does not give any

added strength to virtue. It may arouse us, through shame and remorse, passionately to renew the battle; but only victory gives positive increase of moral power. Till you have fought and won, you cannot be sure you are able to vanquish your antagonist. When once the foe is prostrate at your feet, you get a direct and positive accession of moral force in the confidence you now feel in yourself.

We may go even further. Yielding to temptation, so far from ever increasing moral force, always diminishes it. The oftener you are overcome by temptation, the weaker you feel for it. And the longer your will remains in the morbid, paralyzed condition of sinfulness, the more accustomed it becomes to that condition, and the less ready it is to act for virtue and holiness. Remember that the spiritual nature of man is a vital being; that its laws are as natural and imperious as those of the physique. To leave any of its faculties or functions in an inactive or morbid condition is just as if you should bandage your arm or your eye or neglect any bodily disease. Suppose you come to hate and loathe your sin, still your faculties are so accustomed to

it that at first, and for long, they work uneasily upon the side of goodness. There is a continual tendency to slip back into the familiar ways of evil; while every attempt in the better way is novel and demands a special effort of the will. Let a man be miserly all his life, and by and by begin to despise himself and resolve to be generous, and he will give the unusual penny to a beggar with an awkward air.

Therefore, virtue is always better than sinfulness, victory than defeat, because, although the contest is what serves to exercise the faculty, yet it is victory that gives confidence to the mind; and the practice of virtue that shapes the faculties in the mould of virtue. Even though sin reveal truth to us, and wake us up to its own hatefulness, still this victory is always to be won, this habit to be acquired.

I regard it, then, as certain that, although almost universal, sin is not in its nature inevitable. That is, although an almost certain incident of our experience, it is not an essential in our character as human beings. Tempted, it is necessary we should be. Sin, it would be better if we did not.

And now let us look at the practical question from another point of view.

Is it possible to believe that any human being ever actually escaped sin? For example, can we, supposing we believe that any historical person lived sinless, suppose that he was a man? Or, conversely, can we, if we suppose him to have been a man, believe that he was sinless?

I have granted the improbability of actual sinlessness here on earth, but I cannot admit its impossibility. I never expect to realize it in myself; and yet I see nothing, in the nature of the case, which prevents our each and all living blameless in act, and in perfect loyalty of sentiment and thought to God and to our ideals. What makes me hate my sin, and despise myself for it, is precisely that I feel I ought to overcome it. But one cannot feel that he ought to do anything which he has not the power to do.

Now the reason you and I go about dragging this lengthening chain with us is — just what? Why do we consent to live hampered and degraded by evil, when we might live, joyous and free, in sinless peace?

Simply because we, as individuals, lack the

force or the sight. Our faculties are too little developed or are ill-balanced. It is of the nature of an imperfect thing that its parts should be so. But why should it seem incredible to us that men should be born with, or attain to, such moral perception and force, such an equilibrium of the faculties and development of them as should protect them or rescue them from this trying experience? It is not, remember, that they should be born inaccessible to the seductions of evil, but that they should be, or become, capable of resisting evil through the perception of its real character and of the beauty and excellence of virtue. To relieve them from the possibility of temptation would be to dehumanize them; but that expansion and balance of the faculties which should enable them to meet it and to keep themselves in a state of sympathy with holiness and with God, its personal realization, would depend on and consist in the development of the genuine characteristics of manhood.

In short, perfectibility is an attribute of an imperfect being, as logically as the actual limitation of attainment, as the term "imperfection"

implies. He is no more an imperfect being who cannot become perfect than he who has become so. If Calvinism, for example, be true, man is perfect now. If he be by nature so bad as that scheme has represented him, and cannot improve, then he has reached the limit of his capacities and has attained his ideal.

But, if man is essentially perfectible, why should not some attain perfection? I mean, of course, by perfection not the absolute idea of the complete expansion of all faculties up to their infinite degrees (which in one sense can never be attained by man, and which is Deity), but that practical state of equilibrium, of entire truth to self, of complete devotion to the good, and unqualified rejection of the evil, implied in the word "perfect" as used by Jesus, in the text and elsewhere, and by many other writers both in the Old and the New Testament, and which we sometimes describe as "perfection on the plane of manhood." This is what Jesus calls us to, in our text,— that, as God is perfect in His sphere, so we should be in ours. And this, it seems to me, is entirely conceivable; and, if it be, unhappily, not probable in us as

individuals, we must certainly admit its entire possibility.

And, my friends, despite all the evil of the world, there seems to me enough to encourage it as a hope. Without recurring now to the illustrious character to which the subject naturally turns our thoughts (for I have wished to discuss it on general grounds), I see on many sides facts that abundantly encourage it. As I stand by the bedside of death or distress, and see how calmly the one is always met and how patiently the other is almost always endured; as I see a crippled form, through which the wrenches and twinges of pain course momentarily, without assuagement or intermission, and yet without extorting a word of complaint; as I see a tender mother, her little brood swept away at a breath, till her heart wrings in agony, still able to say, "Thy will be done"; as I read of the heroism of battlefields, when pure devotion has led men into those God-defying horrors; as I see brave hearts daring pestilence to carry succor; as I find, always and as a characteristic fact, that the advent of real trial develops unknown strength, my heart rises to a confidence in the glorious

capacities of manhood which can admit any possibility of achievement. Yes, and who of you has not known, as life wound its way among men, those saintly souls in whom this completeness of attainment seemed to you almost visibly realized, coming so near to this complete purification and balancing of the mind that at least your perhaps sin-clouded vision could not detect wherein it had not been attained? Alas for life, if there were not such! — these holy ones, that shine out in the firmament of history and life, stars of first magnitude, with their tender but searching rays, bringing God near to us by their faith and their communion with Him, and holding out to us at once rebuke and hope! No doubt, in their every bosom is that same consciousness of higher heights still which made Jesus say, "Call me not good, there is but one good, that is God"; and yet, perhaps, no conscious lack of fidelity to those ideals, no conscious inclination to swerve from the straight and narrow pathways that lead us thither.

VIII.

THE CHRIST IDEAL.

"A Saviour, who is Christ the Lord."—LUKE ii. 11.

I HAVE often pointed out to you — because it is so fundamental and so important — the fact that truth is the food, the nutrient material, of man's spiritual nature.

It is by access of truth that we spiritually live and grow. By incorporating truth into our spiritual structure we maintain its integrity, its energy, its activities, its development.

What truth is, in itself, we cannot define. In form, Pilate's question to Jesus is unanswerable. Truth is a finality, and we can only help ourselves to apprehend finalities by comparisons, identical expressions and the like.

We cannot define spirit or matter, or even such common ideas as sweetness, bitterness, heat or cold.

But, whatever truth is, this it is: it is that which makes things what they are. It is the

reality in every thing, in every being. We habitually confound it with statements, with doctrines. But it is not these; nor in them, except as a principle of accuracy, making them correct statements. For example, in popular language we speak of the "truth" that God is love. But this affirmation is not the truth; it is only a verbal presentation of the truth. It is the means by which, to those who understand our language, we intimate or suggest the truth; by which we call it up in other minds capable of understanding us. God's being love; that relation of the divine nature to the sentiment love, which makes the statement a correct one; this, this reality, this fact, is the truth which the statement merely conveys or suggests.

So, whatever you are, the truth in you consists in your being that. The truth is the reality, existing in you. All that you are is all the truth of you. You may pretend much more; you may profess much more; you may seem to men much more. But you are no more than that which you really are, actually are; that is, you are only the reality, the truth, which is in you.

And, further, the actual effect, or influence,

which a man exerts in the world is, ultimately, only that of the truth, the reality, which is in him. Real effects must spring from real causes. Your accidents and accessories, your social rank, your wealth, your beauty, your learning, your cleverness, your affectations and pretensions, may throw dust into the air of the present, which sometimes shines like an aureole in the light which streams about us all. But it settles, as dust will; and sooner or later the reality in you, the truth in you, is all there is left. God has seen it all along; after a time men see it. In the end, history assigns to men their right places. But if it does not, whatever men see or see not, your truth is all you are, and, whatever it is, it is what you are. And its effects are all that you effect.

So my former assertion is justified; for it must obviously be that to support the life of the spirit, to enhance its growth and develop its powers, we must maintain the supply of truth within us, and constantly renew and increase it. Certainly you will grow and be strong, if you make a real addition to yourself, an increase of reality in yourself. There is more stuff of manhood in you, — you are more a man.

The highest form of our statement is that in which we apply it to God. God is truth, we say,— all truth. In absolute perfection, all truth is consummate in Him. This constitutes the ideal which we worship in Deity — absolute spiritual reality. Whatever has reality, that God perfectly is. So, I may remark, God is our natural and necessary ideal of aspiration. We can accept no lower. To stop short of this is to resign growth, and with it strength. To do it willingly is to choose phantasm and falsehood instead of truth. It is to say, "Evil be thou my good"; for the imperfect accepted as our standard, while perceived as imperfect, is evil. It is to begin to lapse downward; the end must be that which men have called "damnation," — the extinction of truth, reality, being, in us. To consecrate ourselves to the upward task; to give our hearts to truth,— this is to begin what they have called "regeneration," the course which, ending in perfect establishment in truth, makes us at last completely safe. And this is "salvation."

So, observe, whatever helps us to know God helps us to gain truth, tends to "save us," as the

phrase has been; that is, to put us in a position where we shall be, thenceforth, strong, secure, safe.

And, finally, any man, any friend, who should go before us in this spiritual path, and testify of that which he learned in it, who should bring God nearer to us, through his own nearness to Him, this man might be called, very justly, a Saviour.

Now it is usually the case that men are, in their endowments and attainments, very partial. They, severally, possess some truth, but not much. They take in some, but not the whole. They delight in certain elements of truth, in "particular" truths, as we call them, but not in others. Some they fail to see; some they refuse. A man will vividly apprehend truth when it presents itself to him in æsthetic relations, and will surrender his life to it, and even for it, so discerned. But perhaps the same man will not apprehend it in moral relations. One of the divinest paintings* I ever saw was by a man whose very name in art is a byword of shameless vice. He could apprehend the glory

* "Christ in Limbo," at Siena.

of the human form; nay, with the intellect he could discern the outward expressions of pure character and emotion. But he could not apprehend purity and dignity in their reality,—these truths were not in him. Lower truths, that is, presentations of truth on lower planes, are easier, of course, than higher ones; for our lower susceptibilities are more fully developed, as yet, than our higher. They call on us for less self-control, less self-denial, less effort.

Many of the great ones of earth have, therefore, been great on lower planes, or in some partial way. Their apprehensions were extraordinary in respect to lower or partial truths. They apprehended, keenly and deeply, the delight and power of wealth, and the means of accumulating it, and so built up great fortunes. Or they delighted in, and wonderfully interpreted, the truths which are lodged in material forms and hues, or in waves of sound, and so were great painters, sculptors, and musicians. Or they apprehended the workings of human minds, creating the relations of life, and were great poets or novelists. Or they apprehended and were able to apply the truths which con-

cern social order, and were great conquerors or administrators. Some have been great in their apprehension of spiritual and moral realities. These have been the seers and prophets of all ages and lands.

We are celebrating just now, in common with Christians of all sects, the birth of a man whose place in history is very nearly unique. Born in a humble position, of a people politically insignificant, and at the time without distinction in letters or the arts; inheriting no worldly advantages of any sort; living but a short life; his career on earth a failure in form, and he dying as a malefactor; he has been exalted to the highest conceivable position in the regard of men. He is even by myriads of men worshipped as if he were God.

Such is the impression which Jesus has made upon the world. If it be true to say that the effect and influence one works on the world are made by the amount and kind of truth there is in him, it is very certain that, after allowing for all factitious influences, for error, for superstition, for partisan interest, there was some very wonderful truth in Jesus.

What was it?

Let us note, first, that this impression is not — as it might be in the case of some great artist or warrior or scientist or law-giver — that of any particular truth. Of course, we recognize the greatness of Jesus as a teacher of religious and moral lessons; his genius as a parabolist; his greatness in respect to moral courage, personal fortitude, and especially on the tender side, in benevolence and affection. But the notable thing is that no one of these is prominent; but, rather, his greatness is rounded; it is that of his entire nature. The whole man has seemed to men so great that they have exalted him above all others. Certainly, then, the truth which was in Jesus must have been something very broad and deep and comprehensive. It will be worth our while to search for it.

If we turn to the fragmentary biographies of him which remain to us, it appears that the substance of Jesus' addresses to the people was the reign of God in the world; the kingdom, that is, the controlling influence of heaven among men. Briefly, it amounts to this: the total surrender of the heart, will and life of every

man to God, to perfect truth, symbolized as "heaven." In one place, the same thought was directly expressed by himself in the precept, "Be ye perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

Finally, in almost the last hour of his life, a tradition, less authentic, but very characteristic of him, reports his saying, "For this cause came I into the world, that I might bear witness to the truth."

In a word, as you know well without my going into further details, the sum and substance of Jesus' preaching was the complete, unreserved acceptance of and devotion to truth.

Correspondingly, the actual phenomenon of his own life was his lofty realization of this aim. This is the substance of the impression which he has made on the world, that his soul opened itself unreservedly to truth, not to any specific, particular, or partial truths, but to truth, truth absolute, entire truth.

This is what men actually imply by their conviction, which is practically universal, that he was sinless. Some have pointed out limitations in his thought, intellectual errors or delusions;

but no one ever attempted to connect with Jesus the idea of sin. His perfect loyalty to truth is absolutely unquestioned. No man feels, or has ever felt, that there is any form or strain of truth, higher or lower, hard or easy, which Jesus would not have genuinely accepted and welcomed. Whether his self-conquest was literally complete, whether his moral attainment was literally perfect or not, we cannot estimate. The approximation of his character to this ideal is near enough to enable us justly to characterize him. He loved and lived for the truth, as any of our great painters or musicians has lived for his art. Whether Raphael was a perfect painter, or Praxiteles a perfect sculptor, we cannot decide; neither can we decide whether Jesus was a perfect man. 'Nor is it essential to decide this question. Either will serve us long as a sufficient standard and type of lofty realization of the ideal to which he strained.

And that it was the absolute truth that Jesus lived for is shown again thus: that he does not impress us as what we call a philosopher, an Aristotle or Bacon. Who knows anything, commonly, of the character of Aristotle? Bacon's

fame, alas, has its blemishes. Philosophers, and also theologians, love to analyze and systematize truth; they love statements of truth. Jesus, so we all feel, was one of those who love truth in itself; and the aim of his teachings and of his life was the incorporation of it into character. So of him we all know the character; while many not at all recognize the profound philosophy which underlay his work.

But now let us see how our facts appear from another point of view.

I have said that, as every man represents a certain quantum of truth, organized in his mental structure, and as he becomes more a man by taking in more truth, so the highest term of the ascending series is Deity. God is all truth, and only truth. In Him is no falsehood or error or phantasm, but truth only, truth complete and perfect, truth absolute.

Observe, then, if God be truth, the soul which opens itself, not to particular truths, partial truths, but to truth, absolute truth, opens itself to God. The soul which gives itself to truth, which lives for it, unreservedly accepting it, enters into harmony and union with God.

Its thought is as God's thought, its will is as God's will. In a word, the soul which gives itself entirely to truth is at one with God; it is as God.

Now this, more distinctly than anything else, is the form of the impression which Jesus has made upon the world. Men feel that the essential and comprehensive characteristic of Jesus was that he was unreservedly at one with God. Capacity for at-one-ment with God was his distinction; the form of his genius, so to speak. The obstructions to oneness with God, which oppose it in most of us, did not exist in him. Through perfect purity of spirit he was capable of apprehending spiritual realities. His mind surrendered itself spontaneously to the moral ideal. He loved whatever was truth, because it was truth, unreservedly. So he loved God unreservedly, and lived in a constant, open, glad communion of spirit with Him. We are, most of us, betrayed by the shams and falsehoods of life, by present enjoyment, by worldly ambitions, by the delight of self-will. None of these stood between Jesus and the Father. All such mists were dispersed before his spirit's eye, and he

had that open vision of spiritual realities which is our normal franchise as God's children,— God's spiritual heirs,— yet which most of us too feebly vindicate to ourselves.

In all this, observe, he was not in nature peculiar; but in endowment, in spiritual gifts and attainments, he was eminent. I do not suppose he had, constitutionally, a greater power of seeing truth than others have had; I do not suppose he was more loyal to it than many of his brethren, many of the followers whom he has inspired, have been. But among the great men of history to whom we can point, on whom the interest, devotion, affection of the world have fastened as leaders, this is the distinction of Jesus; in this he was, among world-leaders, preëminent; that he had a clear apprehension of the infinite, solemn value of truth; that he knew it as the only final object of value, and utterly dedicated his soul to it. All truth was absolutely precious to him. So he was wholly in harmony with God. There was nothing to disturb this harmony. His will was as God's will. He was wholly at one with God.

Here let me turn back a little. I have said

that the distinguishing characteristic of Jesus was his living for truth in itself; for truth as truth. He loved truth because it was truth, as a musician loves music for its own sake. The truth which was in Jesus was not any particular truth, but absolute truth, all truth. It was the spirit of truth.

But, in the sense in which the truth in a man is that which is real in him, so we say, as I just now did, that God is truth. As each man is truth in part, God is absolute, perfect truth.

Now, observe, if the truth which was in Jesus was the absolute truth, then God was in him. That which constitutes the eternal reality of God dwelt also in his child. Not the all of godhead was there; but all the manhood was replenished, energized, vitalized, by the presence of God with his spirit.

Thus we reach, and intimate still more precisely, the impression which Jesus has left upon the world. It is that of a human soul in which God was, abundantly was; one in which "dwelt the fulness of the godhead bodily"; which means one which, while here in the body, was completely filled, spiritually, with the presence

of God. All of God which the man's being could take in, it did take in.

Thus, observe, what every man does in some partial way, a man like Jesus very completely does; that is, he reflects God, he manifests God, he reveals God. God is to be seen, as to some of His attributes, in whatever He has made or does. In every human soul, in whatever kind and to whatever degree His truth is there present, He is manifested. When a man gives up his whole being to truth, the total effect of God's presence with a human soul is seen; and, since that soul is of the same nature with the Divine, it becomes a microcosm of Deity. In such a one men see God, for they see in it what God is.

I pass by, now, the infinite variety of crude interpretations to which this remarkable impression made by Jesus on the world has been subjected. They are of no present moment to us. Our point is that Jesus has bequeathed, in this "impression," as I have called it, left by him on the world's heart, the greatest of its ideals, in which he still lives as a personal presence; the ideal of the man anointed with God's spirit; the Christ; the man-at-one with God; the God-man,

becoming, indeed, with the multitude, the man-god; and that, in this ideal, he performs that saving work of which I spoke before.

Every man who lives at all in the world, after he is dead, lives in the ideal which he shapes by his life. It is the distinction of Jesus that he presents the absolute ideal; the ideal, that is, of manhood without limitations, in its completeness, its greatest exaltation, in its absolute relations. This was the real work which Jesus did for the world. His actual history was in the highest degree beautiful and inspiring; it was profoundly instructive, an example effectively unique. But the sum of its present value is to assure us that this task of oneness with God is feasible. The truth has passed on, beyond the individual personality; it appears as a universal one.

And it finally approves itself as true, the task of at-one-ment with God is finally proved to be feasible, because humanity so responds to it. Men cling to the ideal of the Christ, of the man-at-one-with-God, because their whole nature assures them that in him is the true type for themselves. They do not always understand him;

how he is, and will be to them, the saving power which humanity really longs for as it longs for nothing else, they do not discern, they strangely, perversely speculate; but in him, in the Christ, in this ideal of humanity replenished with Deity, this typical because perfect man, they feel the saving truth of their nature; and their souls, dumbly and blindly, perhaps, but eagerly, leap up to it.

This is the way in which, in a very true sense, Jesus has become a Saviour to the world. Not by anything he mechanically and arbitrarily did for us through any bargain with the Father; not by what he was, nineteen centuries ago, on earth; not merely (though here we draw nearer to the real truth) by the force of his beautiful example, of that there remains only enough for a suggestion, but because he so deeply entered into the greatest of truths, the truth which it is for humanity to lay hold of, if it is to live, that his human personality has passed into this living Ideal, which stands before the world in ineffable freshness and power, always new, and growing as humanity grows, and is better able to discern its lineaments and receive its inspirations.

The historical Jesus *was* great beyond what we

commonly apprehend, lovely as our best imaginings conceive, his life holy, his words golden, his acts lustrous. But the Christ *is*. What the man Jesus essentially, spiritually, really was, the truth of him, the truth he lived, his oneness with God, was the germ of the majestic Ideal, with which he is forever associated in a renown, which no other individual can again attain to, an Ideal which is immortally new, and can only perish when humanity consents to perish.

I need not now enter far into the question of God's providential relation to this great fact. If God is in the world, He is in its every event. But this is something very different from what the common, arbitrary, mechanical theory of the relation of Deity to Jesus presents. How, and how far, God rules, and overrules, the particular careers of His children, how free will is compatible with Providence, is a question both antique and perennial. But in the career of Jesus there is certainly presented to us no providential preparation or shaping different in kind from that which moulds and guides every human career. As each of us is the resultant of numberless careers, of innumerable circumstances of culture

and experience, behind us, all the past living in us in kaleidoscopic constituent elements, so Jesus was the result and flower of all that had gone before him. If we could possibly trace all the conditions of his inheritance, we might be able to account for him. As each of us pursues his career under the constant influence of God's spirit, so did he. I prefer to call it Providence, rather than circumstance, which makes us and which made him. For circumstance means Providence, or, to me, it means nothing. Jesus was as providential as you and I, as all the great ones and little ones of God's human family. What "natural" means it would, perhaps, be hard to define. But whatever it means when we speak of the rest of God's world was true of him. He was not an intrusion, but a development. Happy forces met in him, well-assorted unions among his progenitors, religious lives in the past of his race, maternal fidelities, paternal uprightnesses, self-conquests, self-devotions, laws accepted, impulses restrained, passions regulated. Would you have a second coming of the Christ, my friends, send through your children into the future all impulses to pure, religious,

sacred manliness; regulate the present day; purify society of its malarial taints; exalt ideals,—and in some glorious genealogy, perchance, your names shall some day shine, predecessors of the Joseph and Mary of another and sublimer Bethlehem.

Let me sum up: what may fairly and intelligibly be asserted about Jesus is really this; thus much we know,—more we shall never know. Without attempting to solve the mysteries of Providence, Jesus, idealized as the Christ, has effectively been a mighty power of salvation to the races which have come under his influence. Probably it would not be too much to say that this idealization has been, practically, the most important moral force working on them to sustain and ameliorate character, and bring humanity on towards perfection.

This is not saying that it has been the only force so working; or that God might not have provided some other, had this one not been provided. Nor is it, by any means, saying that men are all, and completely saved,—alas! how far we seem to be from that! It is only stating a simple, historical observation of facts as they

have been. In some way it was essential that this, the highest truth of human nature, its capacity for at-one-ment with the Divine, should be revealed to it; and it was certain to be revealed, not in Judea only, nor in Jesus first or last. Yet as actually illustrated in him, as interpreted from his career, despite all the hindrances by which it has been impeded, the obscurations and perversions it has suffered, and suffers, the Christ Ideal has been — I do not think it an exaggeration to repeat — the highest of the regenerating moral forces working in our branch of the human family. It embalmed and brought along the greatest of the constitutional truths of our spiritual nature — our power, and call, to be at one with God.

And because of its profound truth all particular ideals have clustered about this central and comprehensive ideal. It has grown with men's growth; and still has gone before them, from generation to generation, as the star of Bethlehem before the Magi. If you incline to question the place of the Christ Ideal in history, since Jesus lived, merely ask yourself what the world would have been without it, from that day to

this. Think of the dark night of moral civilization, in which this Day-star actually dawned, and ask yourself what other sign of promise there was, then, in the lurid and murky heavens. Fancy the long midnight of the Middle Age, without this one benignant ray !

Or (and perhaps this will be the most striking reflection of all) imagine our present age without the compendious suggestions of the Christ Ideal, and ask yourself what its withdrawal would work ; whether you would willingly commit the world to its future, deprived of this beacon-light.

MAR 25 1902
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JAN 10 '57
JUN 30 1983

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